

The Bricklayer

by

The Reverend Karen Calafat

An account of a relationship I was honored to have in my role as VNA Hospice Care Chaplain...

After calling his home two times to offer a chaplain visit and being declined, I received a phone call from the bricklayer's wife, saying he had changed his mind decided to let me come visit him. I made my way to his home and prayed, "Lord, be with me, go before me, walk beside me, be within me. Enable me to hear what needs to be heard that I might best serve You."

I entered the bricklayer's room where he, in his mid-50's, was lying in bed with constant use of oxygen due to his severe lung disease. His room was small and was completely packed with things important to him. There were Nascar pictures and posters on the walls, photos of his son at various stages of his growing up, marriage and beginning a family of his own. There was a blanket used as a wall hanging, calendars, trophies and trinkets. This room was cluttered from floor to ceiling, surrounding the bricklayer with items that defined his life interests, passions and hobbies.

There was a folding chair squeezed between the wall and his bed where he invited me to sit. I introduced myself in the usual way, "I am Karen, chaplain on the hospice team. Thank you for letting me come by. It is a pleasure meeting you."

He began speaking, saying he wasn't really sure why he wanted me to come by. I assured him there didn't have to be a reason, that we could just visit and get to know each other. He relaxed a little and shared freely as I invited him to talk about his life and current circumstance. He had been a mason all his life, but failed to use any protective gear, thus inhaling too much cement dust and virtually turning his lungs to concrete. He didn't seem upset, but just matter-of-fact in his sharing. I asked him where he felt most alive, the most joy, the most fulfilled in life. He perked up as he began sharing about his outdoor adventures. He loved being on the lake, fishing, camping, just being. He stated anything on the water made him happy and peaceful.

After a while of sharing his interests and passion for the outdoors, he looked at me and said, "What are you?" I was a bit puzzled by this question and am sure I had a perplexed look on my face as I responded, "What do you mean, 'what am I'?"

He said, "I thought you were a chaplain."

"Yes. I am."

"But I thought every other word out of your mouth would be "God," but you haven't talked about God at all."

"No," I said, "but you have." And at that, he was the one with the perplexed look on his face. "You have been telling me all about worshipping in the Cathedral of the Great Outdoors, about how energized you feel, how complete and at peace you are when you are on the lake... God's amazing creation, given for your use and enjoyment."

Tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks as he nodded with seemingly surprised understanding and relief. He said, "I like you. You can come back any time." I agreed to do so and affirmed his faith. After a few moments of silence, the bricklayer said, "I want to ask you something... Can you baptize me?"

I was not anticipating that question at all, but answered, "Yes, I can baptize you. What makes you want to be baptized?"

He began explaining how baptism was on his "bucket list," as one of those things he had always meant to do, but never found the right time or circumstances to do it. I engaged him in deeper conversation that led to his explanation that as a very young boy, he had witnessed his parents being baptized (by immersion) which was both intriguing and scary to him. He did not understand what was happening to them, nor did he understand why he couldn't be up there with them instead of sitting alone in the congregation watching. He went on to talk about how he had become estranged from the church as a teen/young adult, feeling he never fit in and was judged for everything he did. He just couldn't measure up to the church's (hence God's) expectations, so he left it all behind and found meaning and purpose in other areas of life.

After listening to the bricklayer for a while, I could hear his hunger to somehow acknowledge his faith and trust in God. I explained baptism as a ritual that gave public and outer expression to an inward grace and faith. He understood and even took it a step further, stating he not only wanted to be baptized, but that he wanted all his family members to be part of it, especially those family members from whom he had been estranged. I offered support to his desires and encouraged him to start organizing people in order to facilitate this momentous occasion.

About a week later, his family and I gathered around his bed, packed in this small bedroom, with barely room to breathe. We prayed together, cried together and witnessed a glorious baptism as the bricklayer began to slip from this earthly life. A tear ran down his cheek, mixing with the baptismal waters, and fulfilling a

deep spiritual desire he had held from childhood. There was healing in that room... healing of relationships between family members, healing between individuals and God.

A few days later, The Bricklayer went to be with God and we celebrated his life with a great send-off held at his favorite lake. Thanks be to God!