

## The Saints Come Marching In

Carl was an efficient, but cranky school bus driver. Not a nice school bus driver that you'd want to see each morning if you were a 6th or 7th grader, nevertheless, you'd want him driving you through a Montana winter. He was the kind of school bus driver who would stop and pull to the berm when settling a disturbance accompanied by irritation that no words were exchanged with the perpetrators of the reason for the interruption to Carl's bus route. All he had to do was stop the bus, adjust the rearview to the disturbance's origin, and stare down the child as if he was physically placing his hand on the child to move him to better choices. Girls knew better than to make Carl mad; his stare could frighten a first grader into instant bladder release. He did it this way not because it was safer for the kids, but rather it was his style. The bus always ran on time. His meanness on a regular basis added to the effectiveness of the stare, and Carl had a pretty good thing going on. The schedule was the schedule; the bus ran on time. Carl's stare was the least of the bus riders worries.

Carl liked consistency, so when the members of the Our Savior Lutheran Church stopped coming to church, he was the first of the saints to notice the abrupt interruption in the routine. "It's too damn quiet" he said to Mabel, which didn't warrant a response. She knew his grumbling meant something was adrift, so she turned to her friend Sophie and her husband Ty Jacobsen for guidance as they were never too far away from them being neighbors and all. Sophie's calm disposition wasn't rattled by Carl's grumble. She knew Carl was never satisfied even when things went well, but she tended to agree with him this time. Something was unusually quiet. She and Ty had discussed it over the card game they had with Mamie and Bob last week only Mamie squashed the concern with her "I like it. What's wrong with a bit of silence?"

As the maintenance man at the church, Bob Vasser later mentioned to Ty that he was feeling worried because he felt he was supposed to do something to fix it; maybe he should talk to the pastor or Onie Hamma - being the church treasurer. Maybe it was a financial problem the others didn't know about. While Ty suggested Bob poked around for some answers, Sophie decided she'd inquiry with Maureen after all she was the church secretary. "Where is everyone?" she asked her. "A group of us was wondering why the church is so quiet."

Maureen dutifully served as the secretary of the church for most of the years so it was her job to make some phone calls. Norm and Maureen had arrived after the third church building of Our Savior's but had always felt like they were original members considering they had the proper qualifying last name suffix. Even Ester Pine and Frieda Handley said so, "Seems like they've always been here." Ester and Frieda rallied to answer Maureen's questions about knowing anything about the absence of pew occupants, and set Maureen straight by competing for who noticed the problem first. Ester hadn't been attending regularly due to her health, but even then she told Maureen she had had a "feeling" something was in the air. She could have told you that attendance was going to drop off. Frieda, however, cited a conversation she overheard during coffee hour when someone had mentioned a virus outbreak in China. "That's what's happening here, I knew before even Ester knew," Freda told her citing the day and time she claimed to be the first-to-know. She gained an additional lead when she cited a second reason for the low attendance, "Could be because of that new pastor."

Only it wasn't only Ester or Freda, Carl or Sophie who were talking about the missing pew pals. Since March pews have been empty. No one in April, May, June, although a few people in July, August, and September just to videotape the weekly service or attend a small wedding. Jim Kero occasionally sat in the back to give tips to the person recording the church

service only because he had a better eye for those things - when to zoom in or back off. Brad Villinue appreciated the opportunity to play his guitar along with Anetka. And Burton and Mitze Caldwell typically joined in on these services because they could always find a seat where no one was bothered by their singing. Still the saints in their various places eventually agreed that the overwhelming sanctuary silence that had continued for seven months now was a real issue for them all. What would they be doing on All Saint's Day? If no saint's day, then what?

When people didn't return to church each Sunday going into the eighth and ninth month, the saints grew quietly concerned but waited patiently. It wasn't until Autumn's arrival that they took action. What did they do? Just what any saint would do in a time of need. You see saints normally stay behind the scenes in the capacity of an observer. For they've had their moment to experience life on earth and make a mess of things through human error and self-will run riot. Being a saint came with the humbling honesty of what they could have done better such as trusting God a whole lot more or being less judgmental of their neighbors. So they had the best of both worlds - complete awareness of their own humanity and ultimate love of God's eternity. Who could ask for anything more? But they did. They wanted to be useful which meant filling the pews. Wasn't that the foundation of every community of faith that they learned as they were growing up?

The animals and children came first because they have no fear of needing to be fed by love. Then the others: Johnsons, Olsons, Westburgs, Jacobsons, Clubbs, Curtis, Hamptons, Handleys, Iversons, Ritchart, Rodin, Pines, Paulsens, Rogers, Schiller, Willis, Teagues, Jorgenson, Hammas, Kero, Halversons, Ottos, Mark Hallgrimson, and Evelyn Roland filled in the pews. Even Pastor Odlin and his predecessors took to the front pew still on the right side of the church as there's some change even saints can't make. They filled the pews forming

themselves into pew pals as they once did in earlier times, only this time each saint took on a pew pal from across the church aisle extending a hand to make the most interesting pairings. Doris Paulsen sat next to Charlie Teague while Sonya Teaque accompanied Rod Rodin in the pews for the choir where Mel Jorgenson and Ester Pine (who wouldn't actually sing but did want to show her support for those musical folks) had already started a pew for the singers. Nancy Curtis sat beside Peanut Ritchard offering to share a hymnal although Peanut said he already knew most of the words to all the songs. It was Wanda Rogers who took the hand of Bob Clubb, a little out of infatuation and a little out of duty, and asked him to join her to sit adjacent the choir to be communion assistants. Quiet Leonard Iverson nugged Karen Willis towards the back pews as he knew users would be needed even though he often left this job up to those younger people. And so the pews filled with familiar faces from multiple generations increasing the number as the decades of funerals unfolded the souls of the saints that had celebrated their lives within the walls of Our Savior's Lutheran Church.

They were together now packing the church; making a firm foundation of faith as if to say, "if YOU can't be here, we will keep your place for you." They knew that for every one person who sits in a pew on non-pandemic Sundays, there are multiple saints to hold your place until you return. Service is endless: a saint has no time constraints. Hymns rolled off the tongues of the faithful. Even Dakota Roads hymns such as "[God Are You Tired](#)" felt appropriate for these times. If they were tired of waiting for people to return, isn't God? "Your River O God" was making quite an impression on Marie Handley who kept requesting it with frequency though no one could remember the last time they had sung it. Songs, prayers, blessing, forgiveness of sins, readings, communion, passing of the peace, offering, and more songs replenished the old church.

It may have not been the same folks from March, but it was the same love: the love of God, love of hope, love of faith, love of the community, and love of life. Even Mickey Hampton commented to Mark Hallgrison that the choir hadn't sounded that good in years. And as the saints fill those pews in our absence, we OSL pew pals of today, remain vigilant to the same love and service that will bring us back together again someday. In our absence, the Saints will have a day of it all on their own. We know full pews aren't an absence of faith, rather it's the presence of years of service that have built our community so we can face the challenges of today,