



## The Spark

Well, Scott,” the pastor said, then paused. A wave of surprise washed over his face. After a long moment, he placed his hand on my shoulder, leaned close to me, and whispered, “I’m sorry.” Looking down sheepishly, he added, “It’s a tough job.”

Then silence.

He and I were standing in the narthex of our Lutheran Church after the second morning service, as dozens of people departed the sanctuary. Sunlight streamed in the numerous tall windows in the sanctuary, flooding the adjacent narthex through glass doors and panels. The upbeat hymn the organist played was almost drowned out by parishioners talking and greeting each other with hugs, kisses, and big smiles. Children skipped and ran around, many toward the exit to freedom. The boys tugged at their ties and tight-fitting collars.

Only a few minutes before, the service concluded, and the pastor passed me as he left the sanctuary and headed to his office to change out of his robes. He was a tall man with a round face and short, dark, thinning hair. The patches of gray

on the sides and sideburns enhanced his already authoritative features. He always appeared larger-than-life to me as he seemed to glide by in his floor-length white robe to his office as if he was a divine superhero returning to his lair. That day, I had waited for him to emerge, as usual, in his nicely fitted three-piece suit and tie.

I had waited for weeks to ask him a few questions, and although I still felt reluctant to approach him, I had finally mustered up enough nerve to go for it that day. I even had an ice-breaker question ready to get the conversation started: the real, and far more important question, related to my thoughts of leaving the Lutheran church.

My ice breaker concerned the pastor's Sunday sermons. Because I was such a nerd, I began taking notes on his sermons in seventh grade. This was a year ahead of the requirement to hand in sermon notes in order to be confirmed as a Lutheran. When I began my official note-taking the following year in eighth grade, I noticed he repeated sermons from the year before. This surprised and puzzled me because the pastor's role in the church, in my perspective, was to teach us to about God and inform us of what God wanted us to learn. The Sunday sermons were the best way to convey what God was thinking. Trying to rationalize the repeated sermons, I gave him the benefit of the doubt and figured there was some divinely inspired reason. Maybe we were not learning what God wanted to teach us during that particular week. Perhaps God directed him to repeat sermons because we needed to hear them again. I was sure there was some explanation of why God led him to preach these sermons again. So, once he

addressed that question, I could continue with my other concern about the church.

To my surprise, his response dashed all hopes of any real explanation about why he recycled his sermons. That's it? "It's a tough job?" Nothing else? No advice, no reassuring words of wisdom? There had to be something more profound, more in-depth, farther reaching. Anything, please! Yet, his words were clear. It was like when the curtain is pulled from the control booth in *The Wizard of Oz*, revealing a bumbling man working shifts and levers to operate the Great and Powerful Oz. Was the pastor a similar fake? What would he do now that I knew? Would he tell my parents? What could I do?

At that moment, he must have known his response had an impact on me. I'm sure my expression and body language were telegraphing my dismay. He straightened his posture, and his pastoral appearance returned. Just then, a parishioner walked up to us. The pastor quickly turned to them and said, "Scott and I were just finishing up. See you next week, Scott," and began a conversation with them.

Other kids my age may not have thought it was a big deal. So what? Maybe he was busy with other things, or preaching was not his strength. But I was not other kids. I was in an emotional and existential crisis. I was counting on this person, this man of God, to help me work through this turmoil to solid ground.

Dismayed and profoundly deflated, I politely said I would see him next week and walked away in a daze.



That was the moment my journey began. The effect the conversation had on me was not just because of my pastor's equivocal answer and reaction, but because it came at a crucial time in my life. Looking back, I can see how I was primed for this event. My personality, combined with my age, and home life in a family of intense individuals, were all factors that made this exchange powerful and memorable. The momentum of this event propelled me for decades on a spiritual journey that took me to unexpected places. My search for answers led me through organized religion, other spiritual sources, and the disciplines of psychology and quantum physics.

This brief but poignant conversation took place in the winter of 1972. I was fourteen and in the eighth grade. We were members of the Redeemer Lutheran Church in New Jersey and the reason we attended this church, as far as I knew, was because my mother's parents were both born in Finland and their Norwegian heritage included the Lutheran faith. My parents didn't know much about religion, or at least I didn't think they did because they didn't talk about it much. My mom was more motivated in attending than my dad, but I don't remember him complaining. Mom took the lead in organizing the family every Sunday morning, starting with breakfast, pushing us to keep moving, get dressed in our Sunday clothes, and piling us into the car. Mom and Dad both were in the choir, and I think they went to adult Sunday school classes sometimes. This environment was where I initially learned about God, why we had to go to church, and what we had to do to go to heaven. Being my first experience, I have many special memories of this church.

The lobby or narthex of the building followed traditional Lutheran design and architecture. I felt at home going there, but always with some concern because God was supposed to be there too. The building was situated on the corner of two well-traveled roads, with a large parking lot and areas of grass in the front and far side of the building. It was a picture-perfect postcard of a suburban church.

The only access to the church was via a sprawling parking lot. For many years, it was a gravel lot, and I still remember the crunching and popping noise the stones made as car after car entered the lot. Now and then, we could hear a loud pop and a clink when a stone powerfully launched against another car's hub cap or siding. We had the most fun walking on the logs that served as a boundary between the parking lot and grass. They were six or eight-foot sections of telephone poles lying from a few inches to a few feet apart end to end of three sides of the lot. We pretended that the logs were floating in hot lava and falling off the log was instant death. Unless, of course, someone had asbestos shoes which protected you against the 2,100-degree heat for five seconds on the rare occasion they fell into the lava. One could also be protected by asbestos clothing that offered the same safeguard, unless, someone "called" no asbestos clothing allowed. Well, then you were sunk. The real trick was to know which of the logs of the dozens along the "perimeter of death" rolled as you stepped on them, causing you to lose your balance and fall to your toasty demise.

The building had a big steeple as many churches have, pointing the way to heaven where God lived, I guessed when He wasn't here. The pastor's office was next to the front

entrance. Sometimes I looked in to see what he was doing—talking to God, reading? It was a mystery to me because a sheer white curtain shielded my view. I had to go in a few times to pick up papers for my Mom and was impressed with the enormous bookcases, large wooden desk, and big brown leather chair. Sitting in his office felt ominous as if I was sitting in a courtroom, anxiously waiting for the judge to enter.

The pastor, in accordance with Lutheran tradition, wore several layers of robes that flowed to the floor. The top layer was mostly white, and I think he wore a black shirt underneath because a black collar protruded. The robe had a long wide scarf that went almost to the floor on both sides. The scarf was green with a few gold symbols at the ends. Maybe it was because I was a kid, but when he walked out of his office right before the service, adorned with the long flowing robes, he looked larger than life, a friendly giant. He usually had a stern look about him, but sometimes he caught me looking at him and gave me a smile.

Worship services were held in the sanctuary. Its purpose originated from the Old Testament description of how God met and communicated with the High Priest, who in turn, conveyed to the people what God had told him. The High Priest was elected by the followers to represent them and go into the presence of God. He mediated for the sins of the people and himself by offering sacrifices and receiving instruction. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter and speak directly to God; the place was called the Holy of Holies and was where God physically resided at times. It was sectioned off from the rest of the sanctuary by a large curtain. If another person attempted

to enter the Holy of Holies, they immediately were struck dead by God. To prevent any misfortune, sometimes the High Priest was attached with a rope, so if he happened to die during the meeting with God, someone could pull him out with no risk to their lives.

This was a good depiction of the image of God. Certainly, He was all-powerful, knew everything, made everything, and could do anything. He was also inflexible on obedience and belief in him. Punishment, death, and hell were components of who God was, and in turn, respect, admiration, and worship was required if we wanted to survive. But this was not a bad thing for me because He would not invoke his wrath on us since we were Christians and we were Lutherans. Because of this, God was good to us and would guide us through all problems in life and then let us into heaven when we died.

When I spent time in the sanctuary and playing with friends on the church property, I had a sense of belonging mixed with a sense of apprehension; a strange tension that remained with me for many years. Before that, I developed my ideas about God in a typical way.