



There was this older couple I knew for several years. “Roger and Catherine” were high school sweethearts; got married shortly after graduation. By the time I came around, they were celebrating wedding anniversaries in the 50+ realm. “Roger’s” father had started a tractor supply business long before, and eventually both “Roger and Catherine” took it over. It had a feeling of one of those good ‘ole mom and pop stores, as it was located on the edge of this small town. They knew everyone’s name.

They always had plenty of coffee for their workers and customers alike. When you walked in the door, the mom would always greet you with a smile and ask how your life was going, making you feel as if you did not care whatsoever that you were about to spend a few extra bucks in comparison to the Ace Hardware the next town over, or the Lowe’s or Home Depot just beyond that. After all, at this place, if you had any questions at all, you would get help much quicker anyway, and you wouldn’t be made a fool of regardless of your manual labor skills.

Along the way, “Roger and Catherine” had two children, but before they came along, the couple worshiped with a church a little further away, because their families had done so. However, after their son was born, they decided to start worshiping with a congregation closer to home, in the same small town as the family business as well. When they officially transferred their membership, they received a letter in the mail from their previous home church. They figured it was going to be something along the lines of, “We’re sorry to see you go...you will always be welcomed back here...we wish you well,” something along those positive blessing lines as the body of Christ should do for its members, no matter where they go. However, when they opened the envelope, they found something else typed under their former church letterhead. They were told in no uncertain terms that their souls were now in peril for having left.

“[God] desires everyone to be saved,” so it says in First Timothy? Evidently not. The church, meant to be the living embodiment of God’s mercy and grace and forgiveness: that very church says no. Evidently, God has limits to the love, to the compassion, to basic decency and kindness. “[God] desires everyone to be saved?” Not so much, because far too often the church, the place and the people where children of God are encouraged to turn to for hope, are instead told a different message far, far too often. You must be a part of the right congregation. You must show up to worship so many times. You must read your Bible consistently. You must pray to God so often. You must do this and that in order for God to cave in to accepting you into the eternal peace and harmony.

Granted, I realize the verse reads that “[God] *desires* everyone to be saved,” as opposed to God will save everyone, but I cannot help but think of the times I spent with “Roger and Catherine,” because their Christ-like hospitality extended far beyond their store at the edge of town. Even though, I grew up on a farm where my father used Case International tractors, which this mom-and-pop store did not have a partnership with; they still made me feel like I was a part of their family. Even though I cheered for a different college football team on fall Saturdays, they still invited me over to their home to watch a game and dine with them. Even though I did not share all their views on how the world should operate, they treasured our friendship, as if we were part of the same body of Christ, as if we were loved equally by God, as if God does not have any limits to how far the divine hope can reach in this life.

Unfortunately, in recent years, “Roger” died from cancer. Their son also suffered a tragic death far too young. And in spite of what their previous church embarrassingly wrote in a horrible letter, I have a feeling “Roger” is just fine. I have a feeling the cross changed things for all of God’s children. I have a feeling that even though the church can far too often be the biggest stumbling block to the Gospel, God’s mercy and grace and forgiveness and basic decency and kindness reach far, far deeper than we will ever give God credit for in this life. I have a feeling we often get it wrong with just how mind-boggling God’s love will go into the depths of our humanity.

And although “Catherine’s” life has been put through a relentless tailspin in recent years, she continues to serve in her church’s altar guild. In doing so, she prepares the meal that unleashes a love with no limits. A meal with the greatest hospitality of all that we far too often take for granted in the church: “This is my body given for you...[He] took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it for all to drink, saying: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.” Evidently, God insists that grace be extended to all people. Yes, “[God] desires everyone to be saved,” but I have a feeling that isn’t meant to apply to only the heavenly realm. I have a feeling God desires everyone to be saved now: saved from ourselves, saved from all the guilt and shame and judgment we unleash on one another, including in the church; saved from the idea that at any point in our life that we are beyond God’s love. Because, evidently, nothing will ever separate us from that mind-boggling love in Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord, in this life and for all eternity. For that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!