

Susan and the Cookie Man: When folks come looking for a preacher

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January 5, 2005

Let's call her "Susan." She's a 40-something woman who works at the convenience store near our church. I frequent this store to buy soft drinks, and we have developed a casual relationship over the past year or so. She teases me about the number of Diet Cokes I drink, and I often respond with humor or pleasant conversation. Neither of us know the other's name. Until last week, she did not know that I am a minister.

My impression of Susan is that she leads a hard kind of life that has toughened her and made her somewhat cynical. I also suspect that she has made some poor relationship choices along the way. Sometimes she has hickies on her neck, which is unusual for a woman her age. One time I heard her talking on the phone while she worked at the counter.

Yeah, I tole that bastard to get his shit outa my apartment. I didn't expect him to show up at 3 a.m., drunk and cryin' at my door. Now he's callin' me every day, sayin, "I'm sorry baby. Please take me back." BullSHIT! I'll take him back when he starts payin' some goddam bills.

When I dropped by the store last week there was a guy in front of me holding four or five packages of cookies. He was a rough-looking man, dirty and disheveled, with grime under his nails that looked like it had been there for a long time. He and Susan were joking and acting very friendly, and I heard her say something about a wedding. After making his purchase, the man stepped aside, leaned on the counter, and tore open a package of cookies with his teeth.

I spoke to Susan while she was passing my Diet Coke across the little red laser that reads the price.

"Someone gettin' married?"

“Yeah, me and him,” Susan said, tilting her head toward the man leaning on the counter. He nodded with a mouth full of cookies and a big smile on his face.

At this point I did a very impulsive thing. I opened my mouth and said something without thinking.

“Congratulations! You lookin’ for a preacher?”

I have no idea why I would say something like that, and I regretted it immediately. I thought to myself, “What did you say that for, you idiot? You hate doing weddings unless they’re for close friends, and you know this wedding is going to be as tacky as they come. The bride will probably stub out her cigarette just before she goes down the aisle. A couple of people will pass out at the reception, and they’ll ask you to pray in between line dances.”

Susan was surprised by my question and seemed a little reluctant to answer at first.

“Yeeeeeah,” she said, drawing it out. “We might need a preacher. Why, you know one?” Before I could answer, she said, “You?”

“Yep.”

“Wow, I didn’t know you were a preacher. Are you a *regular* preacher? You know, with your own congregation, or flock, or whatever?”

“Yeah, Covenant Baptist Church. Right up the road about half a mile from here. You know it?”

“Oh yeah, I seen that church. We sorta do need a preacher. We haven’t decided what church to use or anything. We might call you.”

“Okay, phone number’s on the church sign. Give me a call if you need me.”

As I walked out of the store I thought, “Oh well, they probably won’t call anyway.”

A few days later I plunked three 20-ounce lime Diet Cokes down on the counter. Susan was at the register.

“Back on the Diet Cokes, I see.”

“Yeah, you know—whaddya gonna do?”

“Hey, we was talkin’ and we might wanna use you. How much you charge for weddings?”

I was squinting, looking down into my wallet and hoping like hell there was some money in there. I shook my head and spoke without looking up.

“I don’t charge for weddings.”

“Are you serious?” She looked relieved and delighted. “Cause you know, we, uh—things is tight and all. How much does it cost to use the church?”

“We don’t charge to use the church.”

Her mouth fell open. “Really? That is SO cool. Wow!”

I looked across the counter at Susan. She was smiling and excited. She was so hopeful and in her own way, kind of innocent. Suddenly I felt like the Godfather. I was tempted to try out my Brando impersonation—most men have one—but I refrained.

“Now if I do this thing for you, the day may come when I will ask something of you in return.”

She squinted suspiciously. “Yeah?”

“I’ll have to get to know you and think about it. I might ask you to attend the church of your choosing for four weeks in a row, and then write me a letter and tell me what that experience was like for you.”

She frowned seriously while she counted the cost of this bizarre transaction. Then her face brightened and she nodded enthusiastically. “We could do that!”

“Okay, we’ll talk about it if you decide to call me.”

“Great!”

“Like I said, phone number’s on the church sign. You know how to reach me if you need me.”

Interesting. A little side road has suddenly appeared, and I’ve slowed down to consider it. My journey hasn’t changed. I’m out to find God or at least be of service to humanity along the way. But this little side trip is intriguing to me for some

reason. I think I'll mosey down this path with Susan and her man. I'm betting there will be a good story here in any case.

We shall see what we shall see. They may call and they may not. Most people don't.

You know, I've never been able to get completely comfortable with being a minister. I've put a lot of work into being comfortable with myself, but something about being a minister just doesn't fit. Sometimes when I'm at church dealing with budgets, sermons, calendars and church people who are unhappy for one reason or another, I wonder if I'm even suited for this calling. Quirky, weird and creative works well for a writer, but to lead a congregation? Maybe not so much. I'm not planning on quitting or anything; I just wonder.

But when something like this happens, when I meet someone like Susan, it's almost like I can hear the voice of God.

And the voice of God sounds remarkably like the Godfather.

Do you remember when I called you long ago? You were 17 years old, standing in the warehouse of Chickering Oil and Supply in Houston. Remember how my voice came down from the high shelves, calling you into my service? You understood that there would be days when I would ask something of you.

Today is one of those days.

Listen to me now. I call upon you to make words of grace and beauty for Susan and the Cookie Man. Yes, the wedding will be tacky. That's okay. You put on your nice robe, and you show up ready to do business, understand? Don't skimp on the words because Susan and the Cookie Man are simple people. You give your best to my children. You sow the seeds and I'll worry about the soil.

This is what I made you for, pilgrim. I made you to walk the earth. I made you to take my love out on the road for a spin. I want you to scatter seeds of grace and love up and down the highway so we can see what sprouts in the median, along the shoulder, and yes, even down the forgotten lanes.

I needed someone to help these small people, and you were right handy, standing there with your Diet Coke and your quirky little ways.

So okay, what choice do I have? Bring me Susan and the Cookie Man. Let them come to me if they will. I am a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to his word.