# PEACE LIKE A RIVER

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NO ONE REALLY knows when it is going to hit them. And, it is debatable that the knowing lessens the sudden pang of recall, that twitch of memory; time gone and never recaptured again. I’ve experienced a certain sense of homesickness from time to time in the many years since I’ve been gone from Florida**.** Sometimes, while I’m sitting on the sand watching the tide weave its inevitable spell on memory, mind and emotions, I’m taken back to the place of my birth, of my people, of my heart, and in particular to the church which was more than a mere structure of brick and wood, but rather a living, breathing, place of belonging. It would be many years before I would realize this, though.

      The small town of Micanopy wasn’t much to most of the world, but to me it was everything. We sported the best in Mom-and-Pop diners, real ice cream shops with the tall vinyl covered stools, and roads that tended to crack from the heat to reveal the ages old cobblestones beneath. I am always amazed that the cobblestones, which are obviously older than the concrete never seemed to have the damage or the cracks that the more modern material does.

      Micanopy was the traditional one horse town, one dog town, one stoplight going out of town, place. And by the time I was a teenager it was the kind of town that I knew I would never be happy in, never be able to rise to any level of corporate success in, and certainly never find any peace. The First Baptist Church of Micanopy promised peace, but instead the endless march to and from that building with the twin staircases and the wooden steeples seemed an endless drudgery.

      “None of my friends go to church on Sunday,” I would complain bitterly.

      “You don’t belong to just ANY family. You belong to THIS family and we go to church every chance we get,” my mother would recite in an almost automatic response to my automatic whining. In the end, neither were satisfied with the answers the other gave, but both resolved to pray for the other’s change of heart and opening of eyes.

      As you would drive across the viaduct, from our little ranch house on the levee into the city you could just make out the little steeple of the church as it poked up into the clouds like those thorns on Mamma’s bushes out by the garden shed. Used to be you could see the whole thing, with its white woodwork, gray concrete and colorful stained glass windows, but then the Episcopalians had declared that their corner on the other side of the road was not the right location and so moved the whole sha-bang across the road and in front of the First Baptist Church. Then, the Post office, then the library, then the Purvis’ diner. Anyway, you couldn’t see the church anymore until you were right up on it.

      On Sunday mornings, after arguing with Mama about how it was perfectly fine to wear pants to church and losing the battle, I would suffer the fifteen-minute trip to the church. I could close my eyes and know where we were on the road. First there was the gentle slope down to the levee, then Daddy would sort of hesitate at the stop sign at the corner of Main street. Turning left, Daddy would kick the accelerator on the old navy blue Buick too hard and we’d all slide forward on those polished plastic seats. Then, a short section until the viaduct, which overlooked the railroad tracks and the apartment buildings where the poor people lived. At the bottom of the viaduct you couldn’t see the church at all.

      Daddy would stop for the traffic light, turn up the gospel music in the car and weave his way through the zig-zaggy road, past the bank, the post office, those Episcopalians, and finally take our usual parking spot caddy-cornered from those big wooden doors. I would peel my legs from the plastic on the car seat and feel the pinch of the black leather patent shoes as I followed Mamma and Daddy up the steps into the church.

      For all the loathing I’d built up over the years, then, it came as one huge shock as nearly twenty-five years later I stood outside those same doors. I ran my hand over their wood, now cracked with peeling paint. The current administration had decided to let the upkeep go a bit because it had been sold and the whole church was rebuilding on the other side of the new by-pass.  I’d read in the paper that the Episcopalians had acquired the building and would move into what had formerly been known as the First Baptist Church.

      I quickly had a feeling of impropriety as I stepped across the threshold wearing a pair of ordinary jeans, loafers, and a tee shirt. What was I doing here? I wondered as I walked across the vestibule and made my way into the sanctuary area. Hadn’t I sworn that once I left town I was never coming back? Hadn’t I sworn that I would be the master of my own ship, never darkening the door of another church? Yet, here I was.

      I paused in the doorway and looked into the sanctuary. There was the pew where my family had sat. Mamma had played the piano, so we’d sat up front. Daddy first, then me, my sister, then Mamma. The whole room was dimly lit and the noontime sun shone through the windows, painting each row of pews with mottled light, almost like a quilt being thrown over it all. But, I didn’t see the light so much, as in my memory’s mind I saw the people as they used to file in. Heard the expectant rustle of robes as the choir entered and took their seats in the choir loft behind the pastor’s pulpit. I walked down the long aisle, much as I had the day that I’d asked Jesus into my heart and both my parents had celebrated by throwing me a new birthday party. I sat in our pew and looked over the piano to where the baptistery was.

      The same old faded mural was there. How many Sundays had I clandestinely escaped into that painting of the desert island and the palm fronds? I closed my eyes and remembered the stories that had unfolded in my child’s mind as I’d viewed the painting with its blues, greens and aquas. I opened my eyes as two tears slid down my cheeks.

      Some prayers take longer than others. And the funny thing was, in a small one-horse town I’d gained perhaps the greatest gift of all. Without being aware of it, the bundled gift had been carefully laid on the doorstep of my soul. But, now, in the still of this place, I knew it with a certainty. The gift of imagination, of inspiration, of belonging and of family had woven its subtle fabric into the very fiber of my being and like a favorite blanket had always gone with me, whether I was in the First Baptist Church or not. Mamma’s prayer had been answered, and without knowing it: so had mine.

      I realized that the peace that I had sought in the corporate world, the belonging that I’d sought in the larger cities and the glasses of Vodka on the rocks, didn’t have what my Mamma and Daddy had all along; what I had, had all along and had simply forgotten. Peace, like a river, flowed into this church through the people who lived loved and died there. And I knew as I wept in the quiet stillness of that country church that I was home.