

## Oak Grove Presbyterian Church August 12, 2018

The sermon today consists of three chapters  
from Bill Chadwick's upcoming book:

### *The Green Van*

I heard the vehicle before I saw it.

I was filling my car at the corner gas station on a beautiful spring evening. My buddy, Jim, was waiting in the passenger seat.

Jim and I are regular fishing and biking buddies. The son of a small-town hardware store owner, Jim is a special education teacher, working with some of the toughest kids in a challenging school district. Whenever I'm having a bad day at work I think, "Well, my day has to be better than Jim's." But he doesn't complain about his students' behavior, or at least not often. He recognizes that these kids have two-and-a-half strikes against them, so he cuts them a lot of slack. His students show significant improvements each year on their standardized tests.

Jim is also one of the funniest people I know, both on purpose and not. In high school, he was the guy who accidentally set the chemistry lab on fire and split his pants at prom; today, he's the guy who can tell those stories with genius style and timing. He is the master of the malapropism and usually has one shirttail hanging out and perhaps his fly open. But he is a fine, fine man.

At the gas station, the thunderous noise moved off the road and into the lot. The vehicle came up behind me, not with the purr of today's late-model cars, nor the throaty rumble of a sports car or motorcycle, but with a sound from my youth, back when mufflers seemed to need replacing—at least on the well-used cars I drove—about every two or three years.

This vehicle had the classic “rattle rattle thunder clatter boom boom boom” of the old muffler commercials, with a few squeaks and belches thrown in for good measure.

The decades-old dark green minivan grumbled past and swung around to the other side of the pump ahead of me. The van was marked with an irregular pattern of dents, obviously from more than one accident. Tires so bald I could see their lack of tread from where I stood twenty feet away.

The van turned so I could see it head-on. I didn't want to stare, but I was curious to see who belonged to this machine. I gave a sidelong glance, expecting to see behind the wheel some pimply-faced teenage boy with long, greasy hair, a contemporary version of myself at that age, a kid who felt that “wheels” of any kind beat riding your skateboard or your bike or hoofin' it.

But I was wrong.

The solo occupant was a woman. As she exited the van, I gave her another quick look. Not a young woman. Not too old, either. It was hard to judge her age. Slim, in tight jeans, cowboy boots, and a gray T-shirt. Shoulder-length, straight, slightly oily brown hair. She had the wrinkles of a smoker and I could easily picture her dragging on a cigarette, though she wasn't. Of course, she *was* at a gas station.

Instead of swiping a credit card or beginning to pump, she headed straight into the building. Just then, my pump clicked to indicate my tank was full. I put the handle away and glanced at the screen. That made me happy. “Only thirty-nine bucks!” I thought. Usually, it was over forty. I had prepaid with a credit card, but now I was feeling kinda lucky, and I thought I'd go in and spend that extra buck on a lottery ticket.

I started for the entrance, and Jim got out of the car and followed me. When I got in line, he just hung out behind me a few steps. I looked back at him. I noticed

that one side of his collar was flipped up. I tried to signal to him but he didn't get it, and just smiled vaguely. He was looking past me to the front of the line. "Are you going to get something?" I asked him. "I'm gonna buy a Gopher 5. You want one?"

The van driver was right ahead of me. At the cashier's, she fished out of her right front pocket a few one-dollar bills and flipped them onto the counter. She reached into the left front, and found one more crumpled bill. As she counted, she carefully flattened out each one. "One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Seven bucks on pump seven."

"Wow," I thought. "Seven bucks. That would fill my car forty years ago, but it hardly gets you around the block these days."

Jim didn't buy anything. While I was getting my ticket, he walked past me and headed out the door behind the woman. I followed quickly, lottery ticket in hand.

To my surprise, Jim didn't go to my car, but headed instead toward the green van. I stopped by my driver's side door to watch surreptitiously; I wondered where this was going.

"Excuse me," Jim said quietly. The woman turned. "Um, here. Fill up your tank." He held out two twenties.

She blinked. Then frowned. It took a few seconds for her to understand. Then, "Oh, no, I couldn't!" she said. "That's very kind, but no." She smiled and shook her head.

"Hey," he insisted, "I had a *really great* day today. And I'd like to do this. Please. Here."

She looked at the bills. Then at his face. I don't know if she noticed his lopsided collar or not. She took a breath. Let it out. Another breath. With tears in her eyes, she slowly reached for the bills and said softly, "Thank you so much. You

have no idea . . .” She gave him a quick hug. Then she headed back into the building to pay for a fill-up.

Only then did I open my door and get into my car. I should have known. . .

After a moment, Jim came in on the passenger side. I turned, with tears in my own eyes, to my friend and asked, “Did you *really* have a great day today?”

He smiled. “I have now.”

*I grew up in this congregation.*

*More than anything else, it was the love and encouragement of this congregation that drew me into parish ministry as a vocation.*

*Here's the story of one of my heroes from my youth.*

### *Hank*

Our family was gathered around the dining-room table for our typical Sunday dinner of beef roast, potatoes and gravy, bread and butter, sweet corn, Jell-O, big glasses of milk, and ice cream for dessert. As usual, the entire family was there—Dad, Mom, my big brother and big sister, my little brother, and me—and, as usual at Sunday dinner, we were commenting on the morning's church service.

It was the 60s, and the children's music director wore *very* short skirts while she directed with great energy. My father expressed his opinion that the skirt was inappropriate and he did not find the spectacle worshipful. My older brother, Cal, twenty-one years old, didn't say anything, but his wink in my direction indicated that he thought her skirts were just fine. I was twelve, and just beginning to appreciate things like that.

Cal said, "I thought the service was excellent today. *Except* I thought I was going to lose my cookies when Hank cleared his throat."

Hank was a farmer, like my dad, and they had been friends all their lives. Hank and Mabel lived on the same plot Hank's grandfather had homesteaded, and Hank was good at his work, especially well known for his potatoes. Mabel worked side by side with him on the farm.

At one point they had kept a small herd of Holsteins as well, which meant milking every day at five a.m. and five p.m. Twice a day. Every day. Twice a day. Every. Single. Day. Dairy cows don't take days off. Hank was famous for, at one point, having gone *eleven years* without missing a milking.

Hank had a round face, an easy smile, and a deep, slow chuckle. When I knew him his black hair was thinning, his middle slowly increasing. Hank spent a lot of time

in the sun and his leathery skin was astonishingly brown year-round. Mabel was tall and slender, with bright eyes and an infectious laugh that reminded me of a stream tumbling down over the rapids.

Hank and Mabel—never Mabel and Hank, we thought of them as HankandMabel—didn't have any children or other close relatives nearby, so they spent most holidays with our family, usually in our home, but sometimes at their big, old-fashioned, white two-story farmhouse. Mabel was delighted to cook for more than two, so when they had company she went all out—big slabs of meat and several kinds of potatoes, as well as fresh-picked tomatoes, muskmelons, squash, home-baked bread, and, to top it off, two or three different kinds of pies, fresh from the oven: peach, apple, perhaps strawberry-rhubarb, with ice cream dripping off the top and down the side of each slice.

They played bridge with our parents a couple times a month, and always asked us kids what we were studying in school, about the sports we played or the concerts we were in. When we spent Christmas Eve together they always gave each of us a present—usually something useful, like socks, but hey, it's the thought that counts, and we were grateful.

HankandMabel were to me like a beloved uncle and aunt. (It was not until I was in my teens that I discovered, to my *utter* amazement, that they were not married, as I had always assumed. They were brother and sister! But that's a story for another time.)

At church that morning, Hank had cleared his throat. It happened every Sunday, a time or two or three, usually during the sermon, the noise rising like the roar of some weird, exotic creature from the rear of the sanctuary, where Hank preferred to sit. In hindsight, I wonder if the throat clearing was Hank's way of indicating to the preacher that he had missed a few good stopping places.

You see, Hank didn't just "clear his throat." This multi-step procedure consisted of a sucking in and a snort, then a growl that lasted several seconds; followed by

coughing, and liquid swishing around in his mouth. With no attempt, on Hank's part, to be quiet or discreet. I've never heard anything remotely like it before or since.

So when my older brother commented on it at the dinner table, he was immediately met with a chorus of agreement. "Oh, I know. It was the worst ever." "It just makes me wanna puke." "I can't stand it!" "I bet Mabel wants to die of embarrassment."

I sat there in astonishment, looking around at each member of my family.

"Huh," I thought. "That has never grossed me out." Perhaps it helped that I was a twelve-year-old boy, and so pretty much nothing grossed me out.

To me, that sound simply meant, "Hank's here."

Of course, Hank was *always* there. A guy who goes eleven years without missing a twice-daily milking is someone who won't find once-a-week church attendance too taxing. But it was still reassuring to hear that sound and know, "Hank's here." Hank's here, in his usual spot in the back; and if there were ever any need for it, Hank would *have my back*. It gave me a warm feeling. To me, Hank's throat-clearing meant "church" as much as the organ music or the sermon; and it meant "family" and "home" as much as the clatter of dinner plates every Sunday, and my father's disapproving comments about changing fashions, and the taste of Mabel's strawberry-rhubarb pie.

I'd give anything to hear him clear his throat again.

The Encouraging Spouse  
by Bill Chadwick

*How can you tell if a person needs encouragement? If (they're still breathing!*  
—Truett Cathy

Mark Twain reportedly said, “I can live for two months on a good compliment.”

I would reply, “Well, the effect of a compliment depends on how many criticisms you receive in the same time period.” I like to think that I’m not overly concerned about what other people think. That’s one of the wonderful things about getting older, especially when it comes to fashion. I don’t much care what I look like. I want to be comfy.

I am more concerned about my job performance. Twenty people can say, “Boy, that was a terrific sermon!” But if there is one critical comment, which one do I think about all afternoon? But I am much better at that than when I was younger. Abraham Lincoln has a wonderful line about criticism: “If it’s true, change your ways. If it’s not true, forget about it.” Easier to say than do, but it’s great advice. There’s a terrific saying from the Twelve-Step Community, “What other people think about me is none of my business.”

Scripture is full of the importance of encouragement. Paul had a companion in the early church named Joseph. He was such an inspiring and uplifting figure that they gave him a new name, “Barnabas,” which literally means “Son of Encouragement.” That’s a Hebraic way of saying that Barnabas was the Encourager Par Excellence.

I encourage you, as members of the Body of Christ, to be Barnabas for one another.

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Some stories on the subject of encouragement.

There’s an old story about a long-married couple, a pastor and his wife, which goes like this: one week the pastor mentions to his wife that he thinks he will preach about sex this week.

“Oh, my,” replies his wife, “do you think that’s wise?” A silence follows. She continues, “I *really* don’t think that’s a good idea, dear. Will you please reconsider?”

Crestfallen, her husband reluctantly agrees. After a few moments of thought, he smiles and says, “All right. Then I’ll preach about sailing!”

“*Sailing?*” his wife thinks (to herself). “Why sailing? What’s gotten into him? . . . Ah well, at least it’s not *sex!*” So she says nothing to discourage him.

Come Sunday morning, the pastor’s wife is miserably sick with a head cold and fever and she informs her husband that she will not be attending worship that day.

The pastor tells his wife to rest up. On the drive to church, he gets to thinking: “If she isn’t going to be there, I think I *will* preach about sex, by golly.” And he does. He decides, however, not to tell his wife. No need to upset her. As far as she would know, he preached about sailing.

A few days later, his wife, now recovered, is doing her weekly shopping. At the grocery store, she runs into a couple of women from the parish, who rush up and delightedly exclaim, “Oh, we are so glad you’re feeling better. It was a shame you had to miss services on Sunday. We were just saying that we thought it was one of your husband’s best sermons ever!”

Puzzled, the pastor’s wife replies, “Really? Well, that is so surprising. I don’t know why he thinks he’s such an expert on the subject. He’s only tried it twice and he threw up both times.”

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I once heard a pastor, who had been a moderator of the Presbyterian Church (a moderator is something like a national bishop who serves a two-year term), tell about a time he and his spouse were given a tour of a very large Presbyterian Church building. As their host led them into the massive sanctuary, the moderator couldn’t help but let out a low whistle.

He was a gifted and well-known minister himself, known primarily for his courageous leadership on social justice issues. He had led medium-sized congregations, but had never pastored a big, grand church like this one.

He gaped at the magnificent stained-glass windows painting the pews with colored light from the afternoon sun. Turning around and lifting his gaze to the balcony, he saw the massive organ pipes standing like sentinels before a giant's drawbridge, and enough pews for the two-hundred-voice choir.

Then he looked at the pulpit. He pointed at it and lifted his eyebrows. "May I?" he asked his host.

"Go right ahead."

The pastor climbed the eight steps to the chancel. Three more steps brought him into that marvelous hand-carved oaken pulpit. He put his hands on either side of the lectern, looked out at the fifteen hundred seats, up to the balcony, back to the main floor, left and right, imagining himself preaching to such a crowd.

Then he shook his head and said to his wife, "I could never fill this place."

"True," she agreed. "But I bet you could empty it."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Courageous stands for social justice have a way of doing that

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My parishioners think that the worst thing for a pastor is to get to Saturday night and the sermon still isn't done. But I tell them there's something even worse: to get to Saturday night and the sermon *is* done . . . but it stinks. That's when you think, "I sure hope the music is good tomorrow."

I *try* to finish the Sunday sermon by Thursday noon. But it's rare that this miracle actually happens. More often it's Saturday noon before I've put the finishing touches on my sermon, and occasionally it's later than that. One Saturday night about nine o'clock I got up from the desk in my home study and reported to my spouse, who was relaxing with a book, "Well, I *finally* got my sermon done. Frankly, I think it's pretty darn good ... a little long, though."

Without looking up from her book, she responded, "Well, it's either one or the other."