

Fun!

by Bill Chadwick

The helicopter buzzed past my face, not five feet in front of me.

A few years back I was walking with my family through a shopping mall, on our way to a restaurant, when we came across a kiosk selling the toy helicopters you can fly with a remote control. The salesperson made a copter go up, turn left and right, zip forward, *zip backward*, and gently descend for a perfect landing. I had not seen the toys before, nor even heard of such a thing. (Of course, my children had.) I was mesmerized.

“How cool is that?!” I said.

We proceeded on to dinner and I didn’t give toy helicopters another thought until a few weeks later, on Christmas morning. I opened my present from my twenty-three-year-old son: my very own remote-control helicopter! About twelve inches long, black with silver markings. And a headlight that actually worked. I was utterly surprised and absolutely delighted, both with the present and with my son’s thoughtfulness.

I loved the helicopter! I still love it.

Not long after, I used it in a children’s sermon one Sunday. The chopper took off from the communion table, flew thirty feet up in the air, veered left, and swooped down toward the organist. I flew it back up, sent it to the rear of the sanctuary, then took it on its final loop back to the communion table, where I gave it a (fairly) gentle landing. The kids—and the adults—watched with open mouths and laughing faces. As the chopper landed, they exclaimed and cheered!

I explained to the kids the point of this display: to illustrate the joy my son experienced in giving me this present and seeing the delight on my face. How fun it is to give! Though I don’t know that we actually *needed* a “point” beyond, “Look at this cool thing!” Everyone was enchanted, especially the ninety-year-olds. After the service, more than one person commented at the door, “Well, I never expected to see the *minister flying a helicopter in church . . .*” before adding, “But was that ever *cool!*” (Okay, the ninety-year-olds didn’t use the word “cool.” But believe me, they loved it.)

I keep the helicopter on top of a filing cabinet in my office; it charges up from my computer. Once in a while, I'll take a break from work, grab the chopper, and fly it around the church.

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Recently, a long-time friend of the church stopped by my office. Dave used to live in the apartments across the street. Occasionally we had helped him out with a grocery card or a phone bill and, in return, he sometimes did a little painting around the church. Then he moved twenty miles away and we lost touch. Now here he was again. In the eighteen months since I had last seen him, his hair had gone entirely white, he had lost ten pounds off his already skinny-as-a-scarecrow frame, and he had an expression on his face that would make one think he had just run over his dog.

In the past he had always been animated and reasonably upbeat about the future. But now, as he caught me up on recent history, Dave alternated between slumping in a chair muttering softly, and jumping up to pace the floor of my office. His hands twitched and clenched. He had lost his apartment some months back and had been living out of his car. But now his car had died. And winter was coming.

"I can't take another winter outside," he said. "And every single time I been to a shelter I got robbed! I just don't know what to do, Bill. I got nothing! I don't know if it's worth going on."

I had seen him low before, but not like this.

We talked about some housing options. I gave him a grocery card and a few dollars to tide him over until his next disability check. He nodded and thanked me, but continued pacing my office.

And then he spotted it: "A helicopter!? This yours?"

I explained how I had become the proud owner of this chopper.

"It really flies?" Dave said.

"Certainly. Watch." And with that we headed to the sanctuary. I set the toy on the communion table and slowly lifted it off. Dave cackled, "Huh! Lookee there! Oh, my *goodness!*" He clasped his hands, gazing with pure excitement as the chopper ascended,

nearly touched the ceiling, then zoomed thirty feet away and turned 180 degrees. I buzzed it past his ear. Dave hooted and hollered!

I landed the copter on the communion table and handed him the controls. “Your turn.”

“Oh, I don’t know . . .” Dave shook his head. “I don’t want to wreck it.”

“It’s pretty durable,” I said. “I’ve crashed it a bunch of times.”

I explained how the controls worked. Soon Dave was flying it around the sanctuary, grinning like he had won the lottery.

When we had finished, he said, “That was just what the doctor ordered, Bill. I was so low, but flying that helicopter . . . Man, that was something! Thank you. You have cheered me *up!*”

The psychologist Abraham Maslow talked about the hierarchy of needs—things like food, shelter, and safety forming the foundation levels. But Dave showed me the power of *fun*, even when some of the basics are temporarily missing.

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The Christian activist and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, Jim Wallis, tells a story from the civil wars in Central America in the 1980s. A young woman from the US was volunteering in one of the refugee camps. Refugee camps are heartbreaking by definition. But this was a particularly dire situation. From time to time, this young woman would swim across the nearby river in the dark of night, to return with a child on her back. She’d bring the little one to safety never knowing when the helicopter gunships would arrive to spray the water.

On a typical day, she worked from before dawn until she dropped onto her cot long after dark.

One Saturday night, the refugee camp had a party. That’s right—a party. The refugees had formed three committees for the overall welfare of the camp—a Health Committee, an Education Committee, and a Committee for Fun! This last committee had organized the party. But the young volunteer did not want to go. She stayed back and kept working, despite repeated cajoling from the folks in the camp.

“I have work to do,” she said. “I don’t have time to party.”

An old woman from the camp walked up to the young woman and pointed a crooked finger in her face. “That’s right. You can keep on working. Because in a few months, you will go home. But we will still be here. That’s why we *need* to party.”

The volunteer went to celebrate with everyone else. And, of course, it was just what she needed, too.

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Recently I was asked to say grace at a reception following a wedding I had just officiated. After getting the crowd to be quiet, I said, “Jesus loved a party. Remember that Jesus’ critics called him ‘a glutton and a drunkard.’¹ So it is with joy and the blessing of Jesus that we come to this feast.” Then I offered a prayer of thanks.

As soon as the prayer was over, one of the young groomsmen came up to me with an incredulous look. “Jesus was called ‘a glutton and a drunkard’?” he said. “Really?”

I nodded.

“Wow! I never knew that!” And the young man’s obvious newfound appreciation for Jesus brought both of us, I think, great pleasure and delight.

¹It’s Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34, if you don’t believe me.

On Motorcycles

by Bill Chadwick

A story is told about a man who decided to buy a motorcycle. At the dealership, he was spied by a salesperson who immediately started extolling the racy virtues of the particular model the man was eyeing. “Oh, you’ll love this. This baby has a throaty growl and incredible acceleration that really gets your blood pumping . . . What line of work are you in?”

When the potential customer replied that he was a pastor, the salesperson immediately shifted to emphasizing the bike’s safety features and sensible gas mileage.

That story really fries my potatoes.

We pastors hate to be thought of as boring and timid Caspar Milquetoasts. In fact, any minister worth her salt trying to be faithful to Jesus will invariably be involved in challenging and sometimes dangerous activities. The key line there is “faithful to Jesus”—a person who, you will recall, did not die of old age as he rocked his grandchildren.

In living out my faith, I have been twice jailed and once maced during peaceful protests against various wars.

But that is *nothing* compared to the thousands of clergy who have been martyred for their faithfulness.

An estimated three thousand clergy died in Poland at the hands of the Nazis.

Martin Luther King, Jr. became a prominent civil rights leader because of his allegiance to Jesus. The Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama, lists thirty-nine martyrs killed during the Civil Rights struggles between 1955 and 1968. Three of those were pastors and a fourth a seminarian.

Father Stanley Rother, a Roman Catholic priest, was martyred in Guatemala in 1981 for speaking up for the poor. All told, dozens of priests and nuns were killed in Central America during the 1980s as they stood up on behalf of human rights and justice.

Among the nine people murdered in 2015 by a white supremacist in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. , a prominent congregation long involved in civil rights, was the Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, the church pastor and a prominent state senator. The worshipers had invited the shooter to the church to study the Bible with them.

Father Joseph Desire Angbabata was killed on March 21, 2018 for helping refugees in the Central African Republic.

Many Christians in Nigeria have been victims of violence, dating back to the year 2000 and continuing today, including dozens of pastors and their families.

In Mexico over the past ten years, more than a dozen priests have been killed by organized crime for speaking out against the drug cartels.

The list goes on.

That clergy are persecuted and even killed should not be a surprise. The values and principles Christians are called to espouse often run counter to powerful political or financial interests in their countries or regions. Remember, Jesus died a political criminal.

In a sermon on Graduation Sunday a few years ago, I challenged the graduates to do three things. I don't remember the first two—neither does anyone else—but the last one was, "Go to jail." I gave examples of followers of Jesus who have taken this risk for their beliefs: from Rosa Parks to Daniel and Philip Berrigan to Dorothy Day. Even in a democracy like the U.S., faithfully following Jesus *should* get one crossways with political authorities. (Interesting word: "*crossways*.")

So if a pastor wants to blow off some steam on a motorcycle, let her!

And make sure it's loud and fast.