

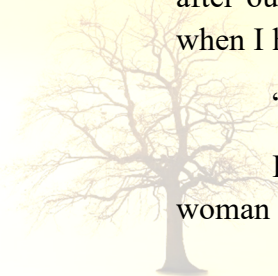
Pastor John and the *Prostitute*



Keith Stewart
2nd Place Winner

Eastern NC Church of God Sr. Talent 2019
Creative Writing/Short Story Div.





My name is John Riley. I'm the Pastor of the Appleton Church of God, and my lovely wife, Emily, is our choir director. Appleton is a small town about thirty miles south of Savannah Georgia, and there's not much excitement here. That all changed for Emily and me on a miserable, rainy Wednesday night in August of 1994. We were closing up the church after our weekly choir practice. Emily was starting out the door as I was turning out the lights when I heard her gasp.

"John, come here quick!"

I hurried to her side to see what was causing her such distress. I was stunned to see a young woman sprawled on the front steps. She was badly beaten, bloody and very pregnant.

"Go see if you can help her while I get these doors locked, and be careful. Whoever did this might still be nearby," I told Emily as I glanced around us apprehensively.

"Maybe we should call the police."

"No cops, please, just help me," the woman pleaded right before she passed out from the pain.

"Emily, I'm afraid if we take her to the hospital to get checked out, they will have no choice but to call the police. Do you remember enough from your nursing to make sure there are no problems with the baby?"

"Yes, I believe I can handle this."

After the doors were locked, we carefully helped the woman to our house next door. Emily got a clean towel and closed the door to the guest room behind them.

"Let's get you into some dry clothes, young lady. I think I've still got some of my daughter Elizabeth's that will fit you."

I fixed us all some chicken noodle soup and hot peppermint tea while Emily cleaned and bandaged the cuts and abrasions.

Over the next four days, we nursed the young woman back to health while we talked with her about her life and what had led her to this point.

While she was recovering, she recounted to us her life story leading up to our discovering her on the church steps. "My name is Priscilla, but everybody calls me Prissy. I ran away from home when I was sixteen to get away from my abusive step-dad. I've been working the streets as a prostitute ever since. Now here I am 20 and pregnant, and my boyfriend beat me up the night I told him he was going to be a daddy. Then he kicked me out of his car, and that's when y'all found me. I've no idea what I'm going to do, but I'm determined to raise this child on my own."

Over the next few days, I spent time talking with Priscilla about the Bible, God's love for her, and how He had a plan for her life. I noticed from the shameful expression on her face that the story from the Bible that touched her the most was the one of Jesus and the Woman at the well. The tears of regret in her eyes told me that the things I was telling her were causing her a lot of turmoil and making her think about her life and what she wanted for the future.

On Sunday, after the morning service, Priscilla announced that she was ready to move on. "Thank you for your kindness," she sobbed as she hugged each of our necks for the last time. I promise to keep in touch."

Before she left, I presented her with a new Bible, and on the inside cover I inscribed it with these words:

For Priscilla

But whoever drinks the water I give him will
Never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will
Become a spring of water welling up to Eternal
Life. John 4:14

Love in Christ,

Pastor John and Emily

Afterwards, we wondered if we had done the right thing by letting her leave, especially when she was expecting at any time. We worried about her and her future and how she would survive. We prayed for her safety and hoped we would hear from her soon, all the while wishing we could've done more for her.

A couple of days after Priscilla left, a scruffy, disheveled, angry man named Levi came pounding on our door. "Where is she?!" Levi screamed. "That's my baby she's carrying! I want to see her now! Get her out here! I know she's done been here! Where is she!?"

I spoke softly as I attempted to calm him down. "Priscilla left several days ago. We have no idea where she is".

"I don't believe you! You do-gooders are tryin' to keep her from me!" he raged.

While I was talking, Emily called the Police. Levi left when they arrived, but not before threatening to find Prissy and drag her back home. Now we were even more worried for her. Still, the only thing we could do was pray. We learned a few months later that Levi had been arrested and sent to prison for beating another one of his girls nearly to death. We were relieved when we learned it was not Priscilla.

The years rolled on, and the time drew near for me to retire. I had been the Pastor of the Appleton Church of God for twenty-five years, and it was now time to say good-bye. It had been

eighteen years since we'd last seen Priscilla, and she weighed heavily on my mind as the day of my last sermon drew near. The mystery of her and her child's fate remained unsolved.

On the Saturday before my retirement, as I was sitting in my study preparing my final sermon, I found my heart was greatly troubled. I knew what I wanted to speak about, but was uncertain if it was the message God wanted me to bring. I finished writing out my notes for the following morning as I usually did, then sat at my desk praying for guidance. That night I didn't have much of an appetite at supper, and afterwards, I sat quietly in the den contemplating the last twenty-five years of our ministry. I tossed and turned all night as my mind wrestled with doubt about my sermon for the next morning. The doubts continued to linger as I got dressed and went to open the church for the morning service.

When I approached the pulpit later that last Sunday morning, I did so with sadness in my heart, but also peace of mind. I had spent the morning in my office praying and asking God for guidance. I addressed the congregation for the last time and said, "I had prepared a special message for today, my last day as your pastor, but God had other plans. He has troubled my heart all week, and even though I went ahead and wrote out my notes for the sermon I wanted to preach this morning, God gave me a different message at the last minute. I don't understand why He wants me to preach this message, but I know there is a reason for it, so if you would, turn in your Bibles to John 4:1-26."

After the service was over, Emily and I stood at the front door shaking hands with everybody as they left and reminding them that there would be no service that night due to the going away party that was being held that afternoon at four o'clock in the fellowship hall. Everybody commented on the message and that they would see us later that afternoon.

When everybody had left, Emily went to our house next door to prepare us a light lunch while I straightened up the sanctuary and locked up. When I re-entered the church to close up, I noticed a young lady sitting about halfway down the aisle, crying. I went to where she was seated and spoke softly to her. "Hi, I'm Pastor John. Is there something I can help you with?"

She smiled up at me through her tears and replied, "Hi, my name is Summer McGilligan, and I just wanted to say thank you."

"For what, may I ask?"

"Your sermon touched me and reminded me so much of my mom," she stated. "You see, I lost my mom and dad about a month ago in a drunk driving accident. They were coming home from celebrating their fifteenth wedding anniversary, and a drunk driver crossed the center line, hitting them head on and killing my dad instantly. Mom was airlifted to the hospital, where she died the next day from her injuries. Dave wasn't my biological father, but he was a great dad. He and my mom met and got married when I was three, and he adopted me, so he's the only dad I've ever known."

“I’m sorry for your loss. But that still doesn’t explain why you wanted to tell me thank you. Is there more to your story that you would like to share?”

“Yes, there is,” she sniffled as she wiped her tears with a tissue I handed her. “My mom used to tell me Bible stories at bedtime, and she had said the story from your sermon this morning was probably her favorite. She told me that when she was at the lowest point in her life, while she was still in the hospital after my birth, that story is what turned her life around. She said she accepted Jesus as her Savior while lying in that hospital bed and became determined to make a life for herself and me. She started taking classes at the technical college at night and working as a waitress during the day. She finally got her accounting degree when I was six years old, and we were all happy together. When I was old enough to understand, she told me about her life before I was born and gave me this Bible for my sixteenth birthday. She said it changed her life and told me she wanted me to one day meet and thank the Preacher that had given it to her and told her about Jesus’ love for her.”

Is it possible? I thought as I studied her features, looking for any resemblance. *Could this really be Priscilla’s daughter?*

“Is that why you are here today?” I asked prayerfully.

“Yes! You see, the pastor who gave this Bible to her wrote an inscription inside from this morning’s sermon.”

Summer opened up the Bible and showed me the inscription that was written inside. I immediately recognized my hand writing as I read the words written all those years ago:

For Priscilla

But whoever drinks the water I give him will
Never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will
Become a spring of water welling up to Eternal
Life. John 4:14

Love in Christ,

Pastor John and Emily

Tears filled my eyes as I read the inscription, and I suddenly realized the reason God had for the final message. I looked at Summer and, overcome with emotion, told her, “I’m glad your mom found somebody to love her in spite of her past. I know now, you being here is the reason God laid this message on my heart. We never knew what had happened to Priscilla and the baby she was carrying. We often struggled with the realization we might never know what had become of them. I’m so happy you came here today to share your story with me. You are a ray of sunshine and have filled my heart with gladness. This has made retiring just a little bit easier. Will you join us for lunch?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed, “I would love to!”

She linked her arm with mine as we made the trip across the yard. "I'm sure Emily won't mind, especially when she hears your story. It is going to brighten her day, just as it has mine."



If you enjoyed this story and know someone who might be uplifted by its message, please feel free to share it with a friend. This powerful and inspiring story, written by my late husband, Keith, won Runner Up in the 2019 Eastern NC Church of God Senior Talent Competition and was to compete in the Nationals in Gatlinburg, TN in April 2020, however, the gathering had to be canceled due to Covid19 regulations. On Saturday, August 29, 2020, at 5:51 pm, as his family and I stood around his bed, singing him into Heaven, I was holding his hand as he passed away from complications from Covid after a brave battle that lasted over a month. We both had it, but I survived by God's grace. As he was immune suppressed due to his kidney transplant (his second, his sister gave him a kidney in '96, which lasted just short of ten years) because of a hereditary kidney disease called glomerulonephritis, he was unable to recover from the damage the virus did to his lungs. I miss him more than my words can ever say, but his memory will live on in my heart always, and in the ways he left his light to shine through his works, like this touching story, and in our book coming soon, *LOGAN, Chain of Grace*, which we worked on together. The story is about a little boy who goes missing and turns his whole town upside down, starting a chain reaction of God's grace that will leave everyone's hearts forever changed. Having worked corrections, Keith contributed to the law enforcement aspects of the story, as well as much of the story line itself. If you haven't, be sure to download my short story, "The Preacher and the Fiddle", which won Runner Up in the 2018 Senior Talent Competition and competed in the Nationals in April/May 2019, and my short story from the 2019 competition, "My Brother's Keeper". I will likely have more FREE downloads coming in the near future as well as more inspirational books I will be releasing soon. Go to Riversofgracebooks.com and subscribe so you'll be the first to know. God bless you, and if I can pray for you, please let me know! You can email me at: riversofgracebooks@gmail.com. May we all remember we ARE our brothers' and sisters' keepers, pray for less judging and more of Christ's love, and be His hands reaching out to the hurting around us. And as always, thank you for your ongoing prayers and support as we all continue to work together to bring in the harvest until He comes!

In Christ's love and humble service,

Flossie - Phil. 2:13-14 ✨

In loving memory of Stacy Keith Stewart

Sept. 22, 1964 - Aug. 29, 2020

