

## And Then Sometimes They Don't ..

A short story by Susan E. L. Lake

Folks just show no gratitude. That's what it is – no gratitude. Why one or the other of us had been on that council for the last 20 years. Except, of course. Arthur Stroud. He wasn't really one of us. He'd only moved here a few months before although his momma came from over near Yoakum County. But we liked him well enough. He understood our point of view.

We used to drop by his business for coffee. It was free, and we liked to look at his secretary. He didn't seem to mind. He spent most of his time on the phone. It was kind of hard to get more than a short conversation in before it would ring. He'd just answer the phone and wave us over to the pot in the corner. He'd smile real friendly, shrug his shoulders, and look like it was such a bother to let the calls interrupt us.

We could tell he liked being included in what we were doing. Besides, sometimes he had a good idea. You know - like that one about the music director.

That woman had gotten real uppity. Why, she'd even told Myra, Ed Johnson's daughter, that she couldn't stay in the bell choir if she didn't behave.

Now Myra was a handful. We'd all talked about how Ed needed to take her in hand, but that wasn't the choir director's place. Besides all Myra did was say she wouldn't play some silly song. It seemed like she ought to have a right to choose something like that.

So we decided. Next council meeting she would be gone. We just wouldn't tolerate that in this church. It wasn't right.

It had been kind of exciting. We saw each other at least a couple of times a day. There was lots to talk about. We'd had to get it all straight, about how to go about getting rid of her. Those things aren't decided quick. Why that week before the council meeting, we must have drunk twenty pots of Stroud's coffee.

Pastor had been a little upset. He'd talked about her nine years of service, but Stroud had it right. We'd told the preacher that he'd better watch out.

Of course, we hadn't done it because it was fun. We knew how important all this was. We were elected to make decisions. People expected us to take the right action. Why, even Stroud had said that. That's why we knew we had to take a stand about this. People were counting on us.

Sure, we'd have to "break a few eggs," but that was just how it was. It's important to make sure people who work for you know they have to toe the line. They'd just take advantage otherwise.

Stroud sure knew about that. One day his secretary had come back from lunch fifteen minutes late. He'd been quiet when she walked in. She looked over at him and started to apologize as she put her purse away. It had been something about taking her daughter's migraine medicine to her.

Well, he never raised his voice. Quiet as could be, he really dressed her down. Told her that she knew what he expected. Told her that being punctual was one of the rules. Told her that he would not tolerate it again. Fred said it had even made him a little nervous, and he had hurried back to the garage.

But you know it was funny. It seemed like as soon as one problem was out of the way, another was there in its place. The next time it had been the church secretary. She'd been talking to folks. She'd been saying that we had no right to get rid of that organist.

Well. Stroud was right. If you can't expect loyalty, what can you expect? We warned the preacher. Told him to tell her that she had to stop that kind of talk. He got kind of miffed. Said he'd discuss it with her. He knew he'd better. We won't put up with a preacher who bucks us.

Everything kind of quieted down after that. Although, lots of folks stopped talking when we walked up. Course, in a town like this, gossip's something the women do all the time. I guess it gives them something to keep them happy.

But then that pastor started becoming a real problem. First it was saying we shouldn't get rid of that organ player. Then it was siding with that secretary of his. It was clear as can be that the only way to set things right was to get us a new preacher boy. This one was just going to drag us down. We needed a new Sunday School wing. If he stayed, why nobody would give enough to pay the light bill. A new guy, one who could work with us, would see that people did what was right. They'd give enough so we'd have that addition paid for in a year.

We were spending lots of time at Stroud's now. It was time for the preacher's yearly review. Usually, we just said. "Doin' a good job. preach. Here's a little raise." But this time there'd be no raise. The only problem was we couldn't just tell him to leave. Seems like there's some rule about it. Course, rules were made to be broken. We were looking into that. Stroud had some friend who knew a church that had gotten rid of theirs.

People were beginning to talk a little. Some of us had gotten calls. There's always a few who want to stand in the way of progress. But the rest of the church knew what was right. You just can't let a man like that keep on getting his own way. What's right is right. If we let him get away with this, we might as well not run for council again.

Well, he got kind of upset. That man is not suited to the ministry. The council just told him what we all knew. He wasn't doing us a good job. He wasn't bringing in money for that new wing. His sermons have been a little weak too. We told him maybe he'd be happier somewhere else. We also said that if he stayed, we wanted a list every Sunday of what he'd done that week. If one of us wasn't there, he should take it over to Stroud's on Monday. He showed his true self then. Said we couldn't expect that and he wouldn't do it. Stroud told him to think over seriously what he had just said. Then he said we'd meet again next week to see if he had reconsidered his position.

You could tell from the look in that guy's eyes he knew we meant business. He wouldn't be giving us any more trouble. We probably wouldn't even have to have the next meeting. He'd just up and quit.

By the middle of the week we'd all gotten a few more phone calls. But we knew that we were doing what was best. We were just trying to take care of a little problem. That's why those folks elected us. You couldn't just ignore those kinds of things. You know, we've been running things just fine for lots of years. We hold our meetings once a month just like we're supposed to. We all complain about giving up Sunday football, but we know our duty. Course, some of us go hunting in October and miss that month's meeting. And I sometimes have to miss for family business. The others, well, I'd say we all get there most of the time. We haven't had to call off a meeting since last March because not enough of us were there.

Folks knew they could trust us. The rules say anyone can come to the meetings, but no one ever did. Maybe once a year, the women would come to talk about that new kitchen. We'd listen and then one of us would move to table the item till we saw what kind of money we had. It's funny. Those women have asked for that new kitchen every year I can remember.

All of a sudden, people were asking when the meeting was and could anyone come. Well, we knew who was stirring things up. Some of us went to see him and told him to quit causing trouble. We'd always been a quiet peaceful congregation till he started this talk. He knew what was right, but you could tell he had the bit in his teeth. He wasn't about to listen to us. It was then we knew we had to do something.

Well, we couldn't believe it. We had to move into the sanctuary for the meeting. You never saw so many people. You'd have thought we was having a pot luck. Stroud came up with a good idea. We all kind of got together right before that meeting started. Decided we'd just set up a committee to study allegations against the pastor. That way we'd get those people settled down. That preacher would learn not to mess with us.

And it went just like it was supposed to. Everyone went on home. I even heard some of them saying, "I told you it was nothin'." We decided on Monday that we'd have the next meeting Saturday morning. The Oilers were playing on Sunday and it was just more convenient.

I don't know how the word got around so fast. You'd have thought we had done something wrong. I had people calling all the time. I kept trying to tell them about the Oilers game. They kept saying, "We'll be there." We couldn't understand what all the ruckus was about. That pastor wasn't doing us a good job. All we were trying to do was take care of things just like we'd always done.

We knew that all that talk about folks showing up was just that. We'd be able to do what was necessary. Then we could get on with the rest of what we were called to do, seeing that the new wing got built. A few of us had already talked to a couple of people. We had sort of a drawing that showed what we wanted. It wasn't going to be fancy, just something that would be good for

the church. Those people who were upset now would see pretty soon that what we had done would be for the best.

We had our meeting. We all got there about 9:30. It seemed kind of silly to even bother going to the church. We could have just met at Stroud's. Coffee would have been the same there. Well, that parking lot was full. Couldn't believe it. There were cars all over. I wondered if maybe some committee was having another meeting. I didn't recall hearing anything, but the ladies hold things all the time that I don't pay attention to.

We usually meet in one of the smaller classrooms. Not one for the real little kids but one that has regular size chairs. We've talked about needing a room in that new wing for our meetings. It wouldn't have to be big, just one that is a little nicer. We could use it for lots of things. Committee meetings and stuff like that.

This time, though, we had to move back to the sanctuary again. I can tell you, we were getting pretty sick of having to put up with this sort of thing. We didn't need all those people. We were elected to make decisions. They should just let us do our work and get on with their own business. We didn't try to tell them what they could or could not do.

That preacher was sure quiet. You'd have thought he would feel real bad about causing all this trouble. If it hadn't been for him, none of this would have been necessary. After all these years, years when we gave him raises and supported him, you'd think he'd be more grateful. You'd think he'd not be stirring up all these folks. Cause we knew who was behind all this, and we were going to do something about it.

It was kind of surprising. That meeting didn't turn out at all like we'd expected. We figured we'd let them blow off some steam, give them a chance to say their piece. Maybe give everyone a few minutes. Probably most people were just there to see what was happening. They wouldn't want to say anything. After that, we'd just let them leave. Then we'd discuss with the pastor his problem. Maybe he'd just go ahead and turn in his resignation. For the good of church unity and all.

It was mostly the women. They were mad as could be. One after another they stood up and gave us "what for." Even our wives were there. You'd have thought they would have understood. They should have known we was only doing what was right. But they was as mad as the rest. Said terrible things to us. Things like trying to railroad their pastor out of town. Things like we were a bunch of sheep being led about by Arthur Stroud. Now that wasn't right. Stroud never had nothing to do with all this. This was all our doing. We knew what needed to be done.

Then Stroud's mamma stood up. I'd never met the lady, just seen her with Stroud and his family on Christmas, things like that. Guess she must have driven here just for this. Boy, Stroud didn't look too happy to see her. I suppose he didn't know she was coming. She was even worse than our wives. Told Stroud he'd been too big for his britches for years. Said he'd better drop this nonsense and leave alone what he didn't need to be messin' in.

Stroud just set there looking unhappy.

After that, we decided that we needed to let everyone calm down some. It wasn't right to make decisions like this when folks were so upset. We'd take care of this problem later. So we went on home to mow our yards and wash our cars. My wife was still pretty mad, but she'd get over that. After all, this was just church business.

We never did take any action on that pastor thing. A couple of us decided in December that we needed to give a little more time to our businesses. Stroud sold his office and moved to a town east of here. I hear he's on the council there. He's a good man. Folks like him always rise to the top. The ladies are getting their new kitchen. It's gonna be real nice. We've already got the plans and talked to a few folks about cabinets and such. Things are pretty quiet now.

Sometimes, though. I sure do miss coffee over at Stroud's.