

One String Banjo

Brother Jim glanced from his car window at men in dark, soiled clothes under layers of jackets, waiting in line on the sidewalk, their backs turned to the wind. The smell of rain was in the air as he turned into the parking lot of the Dade County Rescue Mission with its red eight-foot neon sign: JESUS SAVES on the crossbar.

He and his group, six men and four women, left their cars and chatted among themselves as they entered the chapel through a rear door. Walking to the stage, they stayed close, like sheep among wolves, and fixed themselves in the light blue plastic chairs provided for guests who conducted the services.

The men on the sidewalk inched up a narrow brick stairway, stepped through the door, and waited under a glaring fluorescent light while a staff member assigned each a bed. With number tags in hand, they continued into the chapel to wait for the service to begin. Attendance was a prerequisite for receiving a hot meal and a bed for the night.

Two large paintings dominated the side walls of the chapel, on one side a four-foot reproduction of Jesus, his right hand knocking at a vine-framed door. On the opposite wall, an oil painting depicting a sturdy lighthouse sending a beacon into a storm-tossed sea.

The staff, thirty men being helped by the mission to put their lives back together, occupied the front rows. Staff did the practical chores: cooking, housekeeping, and maintenance, including buffing the gray vinyl floor to a high gloss. On each of 150 dark brown metal folding chairs, a hymnal waited. Some staff chatted; a few were laughing. The street people waited in silence.

A homemade podium with a microphone occupied the center stage, and to one side sat a brown spinet piano. A lady sat down at the piano, opened the hymnal, and began to play softly. Brother Jim's voice intermingled with the sound of the piano as he instructed persons on the stage. "Brother Dan, pick out the songs the boys know--about three. You know which ones. Lucy, you gonna' sing one song, or two?"

Lucy was one of three women who came prepared to sing solos. "One," she said.

"You girls be sure to give your testimony before you sing. That'll help the boys." He didn't say much. He and his group had been following the same routine once a month for at least two decades. The pianist stopped playing when Jason, one of the staff, stepped up to the microphone.

Tall, light-complected with blond hair cut short, he barked into the microphone in the stern, no-nonsense voice of a drill sergeant. “There'll be no talking during the service. No littering. No spitting on the sidewalk outside. No sitting on the steps. Please stand only when asked to. Reading the Bible only is permitted. Showers and shaves on Monday and Thursday. Clothing is available first-come, first-served on Tuesday and Friday. Could we have two brothers, please?”

Two staffers rose, walked up to the altar, and bowed their heads. After a brief prayer, they turned to pass two small, woven baskets for donations, first on the stage among the guests then among the audience.

As they disappeared at the rear, Jason said, “Now, we'll turn the service over to Brother Jim and his group. Let's all give them a big hand.”

A smattering of applause brought Brother Jim to his feet with a smile. During the years he had been coming to the mission, Brother Jim's hair had turned from black to salt and pepper. Other than that, not much had changed. His dusty black shoes and white socks were those of a working man. He removed a loose-fitting black topcoat that hung almost to his knees, revealing tan denim pants held up by a belt. His white dress shirt, open at the collar, was neat and clean, but not ministerial.

Brother Jim announced with a smile, “We're here to praise the Lord, so get your hymnals and join in as Brother Don comes to lead the singin'.”

Brother Don opened his hymnal at the podium and the music began. The men sang with gusto familiar gospel hymns, “The Old Rugged Cross,” “How Great Thou Art,” “When We All Get to Heaven,” songs of hope and forgiveness with the promise of a better deal, if not here, then surely hereafter.

The soloists had tapes of gospel music with a contemporary beat featuring a full orchestra and backup singers. The only missing part was the solo, which the ladies provided. The sound man in the control booth at the rear had trouble managing the tapes. While he fumbled, the ladies shared their faith and expressed their love and concern for the men and their unfortunate circumstances. The twang from the first singer suggested an untrained voice; the other women's voices were more musical. The audience gave no sign they had noticed a difference.

After the last solo, Brother Jim came to the podium and presided as volunteers told what God had done for them, a privilege restricted to the staff and those seated on the stage. “Wine testimonies” from street people who might have had too much to drink were discouraged because they often dragged on and usually included things nobody wanted to listen to.

Finally, Brother Jim placed his well-worn King James Version of the Bible on the podium, opened it, and read. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." As he continued to read, he mispronounced difficult Biblical names and missed words of three or more syllables. His torturous reading was immaterial; he had a message. He prayed, "God, anoint me to deliver the message you have for the boys here tonight."

He continued, "I left home when I was 14 and made a promise I'd never cry again," a vow he did not explain. "I drifted around, rode the rails, fought overseas, drunk anything that come in a bottle or a can. I could swear with the best of 'em, and I done a lot of things I'm ashamed of, praise God. I'd fight at the drop of a hat just for the pleasure of seein' someone laid out with a broken nose, praise God." He had drifted for years with little to show for it.

"I know what you're goin' through, praise God, but" and this line he had repeated word for word, many times for years, "What he's done for me, he'll do for you, praise God." Then he came to the point in his sermon that he relished. He proudly pointed to his wife, Verleen, seated behind him on the stage.

Verleen had never been a beauty, nor had he been handsome, but their union lifted him out of a life where he couldn't be himself, thinking he had to be tough. With her at his side, he had roots, someone to come home to, someone to share his life with.

He had often wondered but never understood why she consented to marry him. He was grateful he didn't have to put on a show for her. She was the only person in the world other than himself he had ever loved or cared for.

As close as they were, their marriage hadn't affected his lifestyle. People at work still got out of his way when they saw him coming. His language still came hot off the grill, smothered in profanity. He kept up with the best drinkers.

When Verleen's health began to fail, there was never any question about who would care for her. "Verleen had three major surgeries," he said. "We was in debt for medicine, hospitals, and doctors, praise God, and our bills was piled up knee-deep on the table. Just tryin' to keep bare essentials was real hard.

"Just about the time we thought we was through with our run of bad luck, Verleen got severe ep'lepsy. But I stayed in there. It was years went by and doctors come and went, one after another. They all finally give up. The pain medicines didn't work anymore, and Verleen spent many a day and night in agony.

"I worked all day, then spent evenin's cookin', ironin', cleanin', and carin' for Verleen. Over three years," he continued, "she was nearly a total invalid, praise God. A few times she'd

have a meal for me when I come home from work, but I never expected it, and she never done any more than that.

“One Tuesday they called work to tell me to come home ‘cause Verleen was havin’ such a hard time. When I got home, the doctor was just leavin’. He said he couldn’ help her, and he knew nothin’ else to do, praise God. Verleen couldn’ stop cryin’. I did what I could to comfort her, but that didn’t help. I didn’t know nothin’ else to do, so I got busy with the housework. I thought it might take my mind off her suffering.

“Late that night I was all tuckered out. I set down in our ol’ beat-up rocker. It tilted a little to the left, but I never had time to fix it. My mind was spinnin’ like I was drunk. Verleen was so sick and in pain, it made my heartache. It looked like we’d never get our bills paid. I was mad at the world and tired of livin’. All them things was whirlin’ around in my head like witches dancin’ around a pot of poison.

“I switched on the TV, lookin’ for somethin’, anythin’ that would drown out my troubles for a few minutes. A religious program come on, but I was too tired to switch channels. The preacher on the TV looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘Friend, if you need healing, GOD CAN HEAL!’

“When he said that, I felt like I’d been hit with a telephone pole, praise God. I knew they was somethin’ special about the man. He said, ‘Friend, just come over here and put your hand on the TV. We’re gonna pray for you now.’”

Brother Jim continued his story as a freight train came rumbling down the tracks behind the mission, shaking the building as boxcars passed, followed by several minutes of click-clack-click-clack. Brother Jim was not deterred; he merely raised his voice till the train had passed.

“I heard Verleen there in the next room, groanin’ in pain with no relief in sight. Before I knew it, I was on my hands and knees, crawlin’ toward the TV. For the first time since I grew up, praise God, I started cryin’ and I couldn’ stop. I put my hand on the TV and listened while the preacher prayed.

“In my heart, I was pleadin’, ‘God, if there’s a God, if you heal my wife, I’ll go to church. I’ll be saved. I’ll do anything you ask! Just heal my wife!’

“Then I heard a voice. It told me to go to Second and Thomas. I couldn’ tell if it was only in my mind or out loud. I didn’t know, and I didn’t care. I walked into the bedroom and told Verleen what had just happened, and for the first time in months, she slept the whole night through without wakin’ up once, praise God.

“The next day I asked the only man at work who had ever acted friendly to me if he knew anything about Second and Thomas.

“He smiled and said, ‘That’s the church I go to.’

“I gave him the surprise of his life by tellin’ him, ‘I’ll see you there next Sunday.’ All the rest of that week I couldn’t stop thinkin’ about that voice that told me to go to Second and Thomas.

“When Sunday come, I had a time gettin’ Verleen out of bed to dress her. At first, she couldn’t stop tremblin’. When she finally stopped, she was as limp as a rag doll. Her arms flopped around and never went where they was supposed to. I told her, ‘We’re goin’ to church.’

“When we pulled into the gravel parkin’ lot at Second and Thomas, I didn’t know what to expect. The little, white-framed buildin’ looked like a garage.

“I got Verleen out of the car and through the front door. It was the first church I’d ever been inside in my life. They had rows of homemade benches, all facin’ a stage at the other end of the room. A speaker’s stand had a white cross painted on it. The preacher was preachin’ up a storm. Nobody even looked up when we come in.

“I didn’t know how to act in church, so I headed for the preacher. Verleen was limpin’, and I was her crutch.

“When we got down to the altar, the preacher stopped right in the middle of his sermon. Ever’body was lookin’ at us.

“He said, ‘What do you want?’

“I told him, ‘My wife is sick. I want you to pray for her to be healed.’

“The preacher said, ‘Do you believe?’

“I said, ‘If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here.’

“He called for all the people who believed to gather ‘round to pray for Verleen.

Them people was prayer warriors! They was used to spiritual battle! They swarmed the altar like a bunch of bees and began prayin’ all at once. In a few seconds, the noise was almost deafnin’, people cryin’, beggin’ for mercy, askin’ for healin’, confessin’ their sins, demandin’ that God heal Verleen. Some of ‘em was on their knees. Some had their hands in the air, some weepin’, holdin’ one another, placin’ their hands-on Verleen.

“I can’t tell you how long it went on—an hour or two hours, I don’t know. But like somebody give a signal, the prayin’ stopped and a feeling of peace fell over the room.

“Verleen lay before the altar as still as a baby in a crib, praise God. God had visited us. Verleen was healed. It was a miracle.”

Brother Jim glowed. He had reached the climax of his story. “I can’t describe the look on her face,” Brother Jim said. Behind him, on the stage, Verleen’s face showed the marks of age and a long life.

He continued, “She looked at me like she couldn’t believe what just happened. People was sayin’, ‘Praise God! Praise God,’ and Verleen walked without help out to the car to go home.

“About a week later we went to see the doctor. He told us they wasn’t no way medical science could explain what happened to her.” Brother Jim took a deep breath and repeated his mantra: “And what He’s done for me, he’ll do for you!”

As he descended from his emotional high, glassy-eyed stares in the faces of the staff in the front rows made him break rhythm.

What did that look mean? Didn’t they believe him? Hadn’t they been listening? He glanced first right then left, like an actor who had lost his place in the script searching for someone to cue him. Brother Jim’s face had the blank, uncomprehending gaze of a shock victim. His head bent forward, looking toward the floor but not at it. He mumbled quietly, almost in an aside, “It’s been a long time since anyone got healed at church. Now when someone’s sick, they just say a little prayer, and ever’one goes home. No one wants to stay and pray it through.”

Shaking his head, he lamented, “People just don’t seem to have power like they used to. It’s been years since I seen anybody healed.”

God had not changed, nor His message. People were still sick and in need. Where were the miracles? Had he been wrong all these years? Would God do for these men what He had done for him and Verleen? And if God would, why hadn’t He?

He suddenly felt like the singer who walks up a ramp to a raised platform. House lights dim, spotlights come on, and he is in his glory, singing the loud notes, the high notes, the long-held notes, and ending with “and the home of the brave!” That’s the signal for the audience to finish the anthem with, “PLAY BALL!” The spots go off, and they shuttle the singer off the field. They have heard the anthem many times before, and the singer is instantly irrelevant. In a secret place, Brother Jim harbored the fear that as he finished his message, the men might stand up and shout, “LET’S EAT!”

Brother Jim's eyes glazed, his hands hung limp at his side, and his voice trailed off. "I don't understand . . . people aren't bein' healed like they used to."

Like a fish that had taken a hook but continued fighting, he plunged deep into his inner darkness. In those shadows, his persona welcomed him back to a familiar warmth and security. Almost like an afterthought, he offered, "God promises to heal if we believe . . . God always does what he says he'll do. If people aren't healed, I guess they just don't believe. It must be," he repeated, beginning to brighten up, "we just don't have faith like we used to, praise God."

He was back on script. "Now, anybody who wants prayer, come to the front and we'll pray for you." Still brighter with a smile and a vigorous nod, he repeated, "What he's done for me, he'll do for you, praise God."

The pianist began playing, "Just as I am, without one plea, O Lamb of God, I come." Brother Jim left the stage and stood at the altar with his arms outstretched toward the audience. Four men rose, one by one, and came to stand by him.

He talked with each one. Some men came off the stage and placed their arms around the shoulders of the four men. They all prayed aloud simultaneously while the audience waited patiently.

As 8:30 neared, Brother Jim returned to the podium and announced over the microphone, "I see my time's about up. Anybody else who wants prayer, we'll meet you in the prayer room. Don't worry about supper. If you need prayer, they'll save some for you."

He bowed his head. "Dear Lord, thank you for the food these men are about to receive. Bless it to the nourishment of their bodies and bless the hands that prepared it."

Suddenly animated, 150 men came to their feet and filed out by rows, through a side door, down a long hall to a dining room where a hot meal awaited them. Brother Jim and his group, still clustered like aliens from another planet, left by the same door they had entered an hour earlier. As the door closed behind them, two staff members began quietly straightening chairs for the following night's service.