

What About Divine Appointments
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Christian faith is grounded in doctrine (the formal beliefs of the church), celebrated in the Sunday liturgy (worship in Word and Sacrament) and enlivened by Christian experience (encounters where God is felt to very near). If Jesus is supremely alive because of his resurrection from the dead and has poured out his Holy Spirit on the church, then we should not be surprised that at times the veil grows thin and we have encounters with the love and mystery of God.

One of the forms of religious experience that I find cropping up most often in my life is what I have come to call *divine appointments*. A divine appointment is a coincidence, an unexpected collision of events in which God is glimpsed working behind the scenes. It falls under the church's teaching of Divine Providence, the notion that God is not just involved in the big events of history but deeply involved at ground level with ordinary folk like you and me who are his secret agenda. My experience is that God brings people together in surprising ways for the encouragement of both parties. I have had the experience of praying for five people one morning, then having them walk in my office without appointments in the same order. After number two my radar when up and I wondered, Who's next? I suspect that being one of Jesus' original disciples had about it the same sense of adventure and surprise. There are many rational arguments for God's existence, but I find divine appointments and particular providences to be one of the most convincing practical arguments for an involved God. Each morning I surrender the day to Christ, ask for his Spirit to fill my sails, and launch out into a day of duties and appointments. I work diligently, and then stuff happens!

Just three weeks ago I had such an encounter, and it surely ranks among my top five. There I was sitting in my car eating the remnants of a chicken sandwich before going into Self Hospital to make my afternoon rounds. I was facing Wells Avenue in the back parking lot when down the sidewalk and into my field of vision came a man, apparently in his late forties, pushing a woman in a wheel chair over the uneven sidewalk. As they bumped along, her head was bent down, blond hair covering her face, and there was a red, Georgia Bulldog blanket over her head. As they passed in front of my car, the strangest thing happened. I felt a rush of compassion in my heart, and with it a strongly intruding idea that I need to pray for them. I had never seen the people before, and dismissed the idea with an excuse, "This couldn't be the Lord. They'd think I was crazy to walk up as a stranger and suggest such." So back to my chicken sandwich I went, all the while listening on my iPhone to a lecture by N.T. Wright, a noted British bishop and New Testament scholar. How pious of me!

When I opened the door to exit my car it happened again, only now with a bit more voltage, “You are to pray for them.” I felt as if I was being addressed, and this time I obeyed after a short prayer for forgiveness. But by now they were out of sight. I walked down the street, then looked back to see them standing between two cars in the parking lot. I went up and said, “I’m Pastor Phil from Main Street Methodist, and I wonder if you have a need.”

The man introduced himself (let’s call him John Purdue) and his fiancé who my now had tears running down her cheeks. I said, “I once knew a Steve Purdue in Cheraw; any chance you know him.”

“No,” he replied, “by my adopted father was once a pastor in a little church outside Cheraw. You might know him; his name is John Purdue.” I did know John, though he was two generations ahead of me and came to Cheraw only after my departure in 1971. Here I had, in a divine appointment, stumbled onto a Methodist preacher’s kid, one I was soon to find had been alienated from the church for decades. “Lord,” I prayed, “is this you?”

It was then that I asked, “Did you know Dr. Jim Thraikill, he was my father and died five years ago.”

“Yes,” said John, “he was my doctor and my father’s doctor.” It was then that tears began to fill my eyes. I said, “He’s been dead five years, and he and the Lord are still sending my on errands to care for his people!” John’s eyes brightened and he smiled.

John then told me that Sandy had just received a serious diagnosis of lymphoma which explained the lumps in her legs. When the doctor told them the bad news, they just had to get outside for some air and sunshine, which explains why he was pushing her down the sidewalk in front of my car.

I squatted down beside the wheelchair and she drew back to blanket so I could see her tear-stained face. They both had the look of hard living. “Sandy,” I said, “God knows how frightened you are, and he sent me along to tell you he loves you. How else can you explain all these connections? He spoke to me in the car, and I’m so glad I obeyed. Can I pray for you?” She nodded, and I placed my hand on her shoulder to pray for healing and that her faith in Christ would be revived. When I finished I too had tears on my cheeks, and my heart was bursting with gratitude at the awesome mercy of a God who could arrange such a meeting. Call it what you will. I call it a *divine appointment*. John’s adopted father called me several days later and said, “Phil, they want to back to church now.” I regularly find my faith in Christ confirmed in such encounters, every one a witness that Jesus is indeed alive.
