

My great-grandpa Chester was a hard man. Chester spent most of his years outdoors doing hard work under the hot suns of Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. He'd take just about any job that paid, and he'd work until the overseers had to make him stop. Then he'd get on site early the next morning and put in a half-day before anyone else showed up. Every inch of his skin not covered by a t-shirt or jeans got leathered by all that sun. He looked like a dried up hedge apple. And his hands, my god that man's hands were made of stone. I'm convinced he could hammer a nail with just his fist and never feel it. He was a tough old dude. Chester was an Arkie looking for work when work was scarce. The hills of Arkansas didn't hold much in the way of prospects, so Chester caught a ride out West to the distant country of Oklahoma. He found a job here and there, but there wasn't much in Oklahoma for a man to make his fortune. So he worked his way South, one one-off job at a time. I don't know where exactly he landed in Texas, just that he did. I was told he lived "in the oil fields," but which ones I couldn't say. But he made a name for himself there. He never rose in the ranks, but he was respected by his peers and the higher-ups wanted him on every job they could get. Chester was reliable and hardworking and clever in a way that only machines seemed to understand. The thing is, Chester was never the kind of guy to, well, talk. He wasn't a speak softly and carry a big stick fella. He was a carry a big stick and get ready to womp something fella. Maybe that was a misbehaving pump needed wompin', but sometimes his wompin' landed on other fellas. He was a great worker, so long as everybody steered clear.

By the time I came along, Chester and my great-grandma Pebble were my neighbors. We lived in my grandma's house and those two hedge apple ancestors were just one horse field away. I loved going over to see them 'cause Chester fascinated me. I didn't know anyone else like him. His calloused body was one sinewy muscle stretched taut from the crown of his white head to the talons of his cinder block feet. Chester was a particular kinda fella. He called himself religious. He was buried from a church, believed fully that God was the way, but he didn't have much time for Jesus's wimpy stuff about love and forgiveness. Chester bore a grudge like no one else, and all his anger was righteous, at least in his eyes. A man like Chester wouldn't ask for help, and most of the time he figured if someone else was in trouble they probably deserved it, and if they didn't deserve it, well, any man worth his salt ought to be able to figure out how to fix it. I have a suspicion that, if Chester could've made it work, he would've lived in a hidden shack somewhere nobody'd ever find him. That's about how much he cared for neighbors. We're not talking "good fences make good neighbors." It was more like "no neighbors make good neighbors." I don't know what happened along the way to sour him to other people, and I don't know how, in spite of that, how he managed to end up married for a lifetime to the same woman. Perhaps there was some kindness and love on the far side of that horse field after all.

He was gruff, no two ways about it, but I do remember one time Chester showed up. I was playing out in the yard, picking up rotten apples and throwing them against a tree trunk for the simple joy of pulpy explosions when I heard anxious yelling and a roar I couldn't place. Looking around, there was nothing, no clear source for all that racket. But my sisters poured out of the house, and my mom stood on the front porch, and Chester sprinted his wiry body across the horse field. They all seemed to be converging on me, but I couldn't make sense of why until I heard the roar again and looked up. Directly above me, maybe thirty feet off the ground, was a hot air balloon! Now, I'd seen hot air balloons before, but they tended to be way up high, magical spots of color far enough up to be the size of my thumbnail. This was no thumbnail. The craft lost altitude quickly and the pilot's flame roared loud and high, but the balloon had a tear down one side. No question about it, they were about to crash. The basket sped overhead, I lost all interest in rotten apples, and my feet carried me along with the rest of my sprinting family members. We ran, trying to keep up with the doomed balloon, but it was fast.

Too fast for my little legs to catch, but Chester flew by. Somehow that old man turned on his jets and propelled past us all. Mid-sprint, he approximated where the balloon was gonna land and stopped. He knew better than to get in the way of a speeding hot air balloon.

The pilot hunkered down as the basket hit the ground hard and sorta bounced once before hitting hard again some twenty feet farther on, and from there it dragged a ways. Finally, the basket tumped over spilling the dazed pilot and passenger surprisingly gently. The torn balloon lay ahead, a deflated and rippling rainbow. Chester leapt into action, shutting off the still-burning gas and helping the pilot to his feet. The two were already tending to the frightened but uninjured passenger by the time I reached the scene. A few minutes later, the balloon's chase car arrived and they ran over, too. The whole shaky crew reunited and shook Chester's hand and offered him something for his help, but he just smiled and left 'em to their business. I don't remember seeing him smile that big ever before or ever again. He looked like he'd been caught with a great secret. I suppose we weren't supposed to know he could be nice. He just winked and strode across that horse field for home.

Now, I'm not trying to say that Great-Grandpa Chester was a paragon of the Christian Life or some exemplar of kindness. But he had that capacity. When someone really needed it, not only would he try to help, but he was handy enough to actually be useful. The problem with Chester was that he wouldn't help until things got really dire. But that makes me wonder. Because I have this image in my head of exemplary Christians being all good all the time, impossible saints doing impossible things in impossible situations. OR, sometimes I think of exemplary Christians just being all the time kind and generous. But Chester wasn't that. Really, Chester came off as a hardened old grump. Didn't seem to be much Christ-like to him at all. But that day when a neighbor fell from the sky, Chester rushed to him. He leapt into the danger of the burning gas tank. His old body needed a few days to recover from that three-acre sprint. But Chester saw trouble and jumped without regard for himself. Sacrifice for one's neighbor comes from unexpected places. I never would've guessed that day would play out like that. But it did. And it changed how I saw grumpy old men with calloused hands. Jesus says the entirety of God's message hangs on two things: Love God and love your neighbor. We've heard this a million times, and we think we know what it means. And sometimes we fall in the trap of thinking we know who's capable of pulling it off. Surely not everyone can Love God *and* their neighbor. Chester showed me that was wrong. Every single one of us has that capacity. Maybe you don't know how to shut off leaking gas tanks, but there's something you can do, even if it just means being there when your neighbor crashes down.

I guess I'm telling y'all this because the entire world seems to be losing its collective mind, and the images we have of what is good and right get challenged every day. Christ is getting harder to see. And yet, Christ is among us. And Christ comes from unexpected places. Always. He was supposed to be a king, a military conqueror, a charismatic leader. What he was instead was a poor kid from a backwater town, hands hardened by years of carpentry, not even a stone to call his bed. He was dirty and outcast and nothing but trouble. He probably looked a lot more like Chester than I would've guessed. He was unexpected. All that we're about hangs on these two things: Love God and love your neighbor. Love them as only you can. I hope you'll never have occasion to be the saint needed in a time when only saints can save, but I also hope you'll search for every occasion to love.

I don't know that our world needs more Chesters in it. But we do need more neighbors ready to sprint across fields to come to each other's aid. We need more love, our neighbors need more love. I wish I could tell you what it's going to look like when the world singles you out and says "Alright, it's your turn." But I don't. All I know is that, the more we practice all this love, the easier it gets to show up. And when we show up, we show up with God. And when we show up with God, we show up with love. What is the greatest commandment? Love God and love your neighbor.