

**“GOD BLESS YOU, MRS. DEGRAFINRIED!”**

*John 14:23-27*

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It all started early Tuesday morning, February 21, when Louise Degrafinried’s husband, Nathan, got up from bed in Mason, Tennessee, to let out the cat. “Cat,” as they called him, stood at the edge of the porch, his hair bristled up on his arched back, and he hissed. “What do you see out there, Cat?” Nathan asked.

Just then a big man stepped from around the corner of the house and pointed a shotgun at Nathan. “Lord, Honey,” Louise heard her husband shout. “Open the door. He’s got a gun!”

Before she could open the door, the man with the gun had shoved Nathan inside, pushing him and Louise against the wall.

“Don’t make me kill you!” he shouted, thrusting the gun in their faces. The couple knew immediately that the intruder was one of the escaped inmates whom they had heard about on the radio. He was Riley Arzeneaux of Memphis, who, along with four other inmates, had escaped from Fort Pillow State Prison the previous Saturday.

Louise Degrafinried, a 73 year old grandmother, stood her ground. “Young man,” she said, “I am a Christian lady. I don’t believe in no violence. Put that gun down and you sit down, right now. I don’t allow no violence here.”

The man relaxed his grip on the shotgun. He looked at her for a moment. Louise never took her eyes off him. Then he laid his gun on the couch.

“Lady,” he said quietly, “I’m so hungry. I haven’t had nothing to eat for three days.”

“Young man, you just sit down there and I’ll fix you breakfast. Nathan,” she said, “Go get this young man some dry socks.”

With that, Louise went to work. She fixed ham, bacon, eggs, grits, white bread, toast, milk and coffee. Then she got out her best napkins and set her kitchen table.

As they sat down, Louise took the young man by the hand and said, “Young man, in my house, we give thanks. Let’s give thanks that you came here and are safe.” After her prayer, she asked if he wanted to pray. He didn’t say anything, so she said, “Just say, ‘Jesus wept.’ Say it!” Then they ate breakfast together.

“Why did you tell him to say, ‘Jesus wept,’ a reporter asked her later? “Because,” she said, “I figured he didn’t have no church background, so I wanted him to start off simple; something short, you know.”

Mrs. Degrafinried said, “After breakfast, we sat there and I began to pray. I held his hand and kept patting him on the leg. He trembled all over. I said, “Young man, I love you and God loves you. God loves us all, every one of us, but especially you.”

“You sound just like my grandmother,” he said. Nathan said that he saw a tear fall down the boy’s cheek.

About that time, we heard police cars coming down the lane. “They gonna kill me when they get here,” he said, frightened.

“No young man, they ain’t going to hurt you. You done wrong, but God loves you.” Then me and Nathan took him by the arms, helped him up, and took him out of the kitchen toward the door. “You let me do all the talking,” I told him. The police got out of their cars. They had their big guns out. I shouted to them, “Y’all put those guns away. I don’t allow no violence here. Put them down. Go on! This young man wants to go back. Nathan,” I said, “You bring the young man on to the car.” The police, with their guns down, put handcuffs on the young man and took him back to prison.

That same afternoon, two other prisoners who had been separated from Arzeneaux entered a suburban backyard where a couple was barbecuing. The husband went into his house and came out with a gun. The escapees shot and killed him and took his wife hostage.

Was Mrs. Degrafinried frightened? “My, no,” she chuckled. “Nathan said he was scared, but not me. I knew God was with me, and God had sent the young man to me for a reason. Besides, I ain’t afraid of dying, neither. My soul is right with the Lord. I knew his hand was upon me as surely as I had my hand on that young man.”

But that is not the end of the story. Louise and Nathan were asked to press charges against Riley Arzeneaux for holding them hostage, but they refused to do so, saying he had done them no harm, so those charges were dropped. Riley did have several years added to his sentence for the escape, but Louise began corresponding with him and visiting him in prison. On those visits she prayed with him. She asked for his photo and put it in her family album, and she began working for his release. Through her slow-cooking, persistent influence, Riley eventually became a Christian.

He was freed in 1995, and in 1998, when Louise died, Riley Arzeneaux was among those who spoke at her funeral. He told the mourners that Louise was “real Christianity.” He was invited to join family members to help carry her coffin to its burial place.

Louise’s children have continued the relationship with Riley Arzeneaux, and Riley has stayed out of trouble ever since. He has a responsible job, is married, and has a son. Not long ago, he was the guest speaker at Northwest Elementary School in Mason, Tennessee, where the principal of the school is, can you guess? --- a daughter of Louise and Nathan Degrafinried!

I am indebted to a minister-friend of mine for the words I have just shared. Yes, in case you are wondering, this is a true story. Now, all the stories I tell are true, but this one really happened! I tell it on this Mother’s Day because of the impact this 73 year-old grandmother had on the life of a prison inmate. Through Louise Degrafinried, God changed, God transformed a man’s life. No, God used Louise Degrafinried to transform a whole host of lives, mine included. For when I heard this story, I couldn’t stop thinking about the impact of this amazing Christian lady, who took her faith so seriously that she even dared to tell the police to put down their guns. A lady who was so convincing that the police did what she told them to do! In the face of an impending crisis, she remained cool. In the face of possible death, she remained faithful. In the face of fear and anxiety, she demonstrated love, the love that John’s Gospel talks about in our morning lesson, where Jesus says, *“Those who love me will keep my word ... Whoever does not love me does not keep my words, and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the God who sent me.”* (John 14:23-24)

Love is the quality that distinguishes Jesus’ followers from the rest of the world. Love is the quality that transformed an escaped prison convict into an upstanding citizen. Love is the quality that caused Louise Degrafinried to risk her life rather than to respond in defensiveness

and fear. I repeat, **love is the quality is supposed to distinguish Jesus' followers from the rest of the world.**

Eusebius, an early church historian, reported that in John's Gospel, John's only theme is love! The whole Gospel, according to Eusebius, can be summed up in that one word. The world addresses problems through force, through coercion, through violence and the conviction that might makes right. When the man who was barbecuing saw the escaped prisoners coming through his backyard, he grabbed his gun and ended up dead. When Louise Degrafinried saw an escaped prisoner force his way into her living room, she responded with bacon, ham, grits, toast and coffee. Am I oversimplifying? I don't think so. This faith is not something which calls us to ponder and debate and intellectualize. This faith calls us to act, to do as Jesus did, to walk the path he walked, to follow where he leads.

You see, love is not a feeling or an emotion in John's Gospel. Love is a commandment. Jesus tells his followers, not how they should feel, but how they should act. "*I give you a new commandment,*" Jesus says in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, "*That you love one another.*" (John 13:34) Love one another. That's easier said than done, as we all know. That's hard work, as we all know. But as Christians, we are not really given a choice. Love is simply part of our job description. In fact, love is our job description. We are called to put love into action and watch God change the world, one person at a time.

Now the kind of love that Jesus demonstrates; the kind of love that John writes about; the kind of love that Mrs. Degrafinried practiced, brings an inner peace to our hearts and souls. It is a sense of well-being that the world is not able to supply. You see, the world does not understand why we would give a Saturday to work on a service project or a week of our vacation to go on a mission work trip. The world does not understand why we would deprive ourselves of some luxury so that we can give a sacrificial gift to build facilities at our church that will impact the next generation. The world does not understand why we set our alarm clocks to wake us up for church on Sunday morning when it's our only day to sleep. The only explanation is found in this overworked word, "love." But when we practice what we preach, we discover that it brings a sense of peace and well-being to our hearts and to our lives

On this Mother's Day, let us give thanks for people such as Louise Degrafinried, who take their faith seriously and practice what they preach. Let us follow her example and live like Jesus, the Jesus who tells us not how we should feel, but how we should act. When we live like Jesus, when we put love into practice, we will experience peace, the peace that only God can give.

Every now and then someone comes along that has such an impact on our lives; we cannot get their story out of our minds. For me, Louise Degrafinried is one of those people. Thank God for her courage. Thank God for her faithfulness. Thank God for her willingness to follow Jesus. Thank God for her example and her love. God bless you, Mrs. Degrafinried.

*Prayer:* Dear God, every now and then someone comes along whose witness is so compelling that it makes us stop and think, and evaluate our own discipleship. Thank you for the witness of Louise Degrafinried. Help us to hear your clear commandment to "love one another," and help us to follow where you lead. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.