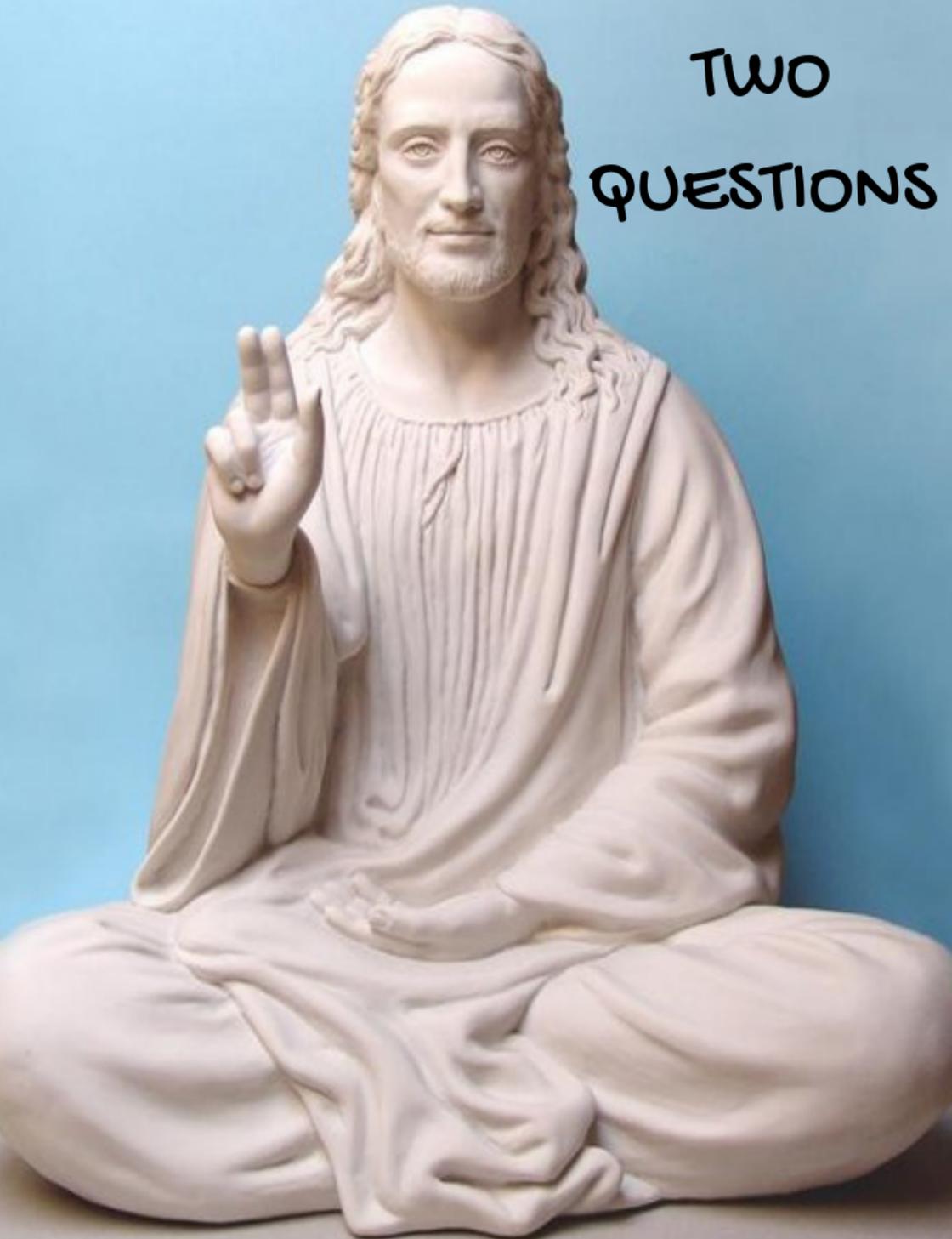


TWO
QUESTIONS



Lloyd Work

Two Questions

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Dedicated with love to the one and only Kate Ayres, who dared to ask the cast and crew of “You Can’t Take It With You” these two questions back in 2003, and in doing so, changed our lives forever.

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Matthew felt ill from the butterflies in his stomach. Already prone to anxiety and claustrophobia, being cooped up in this tiny room full of religious pictures and Christian paraphernalia certainly didn't help things. Labeled "The Situation Room", it was a private room situated right next to the pastor's office... also known as his dad's office. It had been a year since Matthew had been to his parent's church.

"Dammit. I should have brought some Xanax", he thought. He picked up his chai latte from the center table, hoping to ease his nerves with a sip or two. Just then, the door opened, and his mom and dad walked in and took a seat.

"Matthew, good to see you" said his dad. "Good to be seen", Matthew shot back, hoping in vain to get a laugh.

Matthew continued: "I like what you've done with the place. The couches, the TV's, the barista bar... this must have cost a ton of money. So... are you trying to make this like a hangout place, or what?"

"No" said his dad, Pastor Michael A. Barnes, "We're just trying to make church a little more comfortable for people. Like their home away from home."

"Ah, yes, but... what if people don't like their home?" asked Matthew with a tinge of snark. Again, no laugh.

Pastor Barnes then said "Son, we've brought you here today for a second chance. As you know, your mother and I are very disappointed in your life choices and we'd like you to consider a proposal. It's the Easter season, and just as Jesus

gave us a second chance, we'd like to extend you one. There are, however, going to be some rules and conditions to this."

"Oh great", Matthew said in a snarky voice. "More conditional love. I had a feeling you were going to be lecturing me again today. Thanks, but no thanks." Matt grabbed his chai latte and started to leave.

Pastor Mike grabbed Matt by his arm. "Wait, you can't leave yet. You haven't heard what we're proposing."

Matt quipped back: "Dad, I don't know what you have in mind, but I am who I am and I'm not going to change that. I'll sit here a few more minutes but I am not going to sit here and listen to you lecture me about something that I cannot change." With that, Matt reluctantly sat down again.

"Honey, we just want what's best for you and for all of us. Your father and I miss having us all together at events. Like it was in the old days." said Matt's mom, Mabel.

Pastor Mike continued: "Matt, you're 19 years old. You're an adult, son. You've already missed a year of college and I'd like to give you a chance to have a fresh start."

Matt said with air quotes: "A fresh start?" and then asked, "what does a fresh start mean?"

Pastor Mike continued: "Son, you know I pulled your funding for college when you announced to us and the whole world that you were – as you say – gay. You know we cannot endorse that lifestyle here and we cannot condone your

actions. It doesn't reconcile with what we believe the Bible says about homosexual behaviors. Leviticus clearly says..."

Matt interrupted: "I know what the Bible says, dad. You've told me over and over and over and frankly, that's not going to change a damn thing."

Pastor Mike raised his voice and replied "Don't use that kind of language in front of your mother young man. You're 19 and I'm still your father and I still have the right to rebuke you when you lash out with foul language and..."

Just then, the door opened. It was Jesus. Not the real Jesus, of course, but Jon Moritz, who was playing Jesus in the church's upcoming Easter production. "Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt. I should have knocked."

Matt, relieved to see Jon, said to him "Yes, I believe the Bible clearly says in Revelation that Jesus stands at the door and knocks. Right, dad?" Jon let out a big laugh and said "Matt! Great to see you!" and they shared a big hug.

Jon continued: "How have you been? Are you still living downtown?" "Yes, great to see you too!" Matt said back. "Look at you, looking all Messiah-like."

Matt got up and felt Jon's robe. What's this robe made of? Because you know, the Bible clearly says in Leviticus that you shouldn't wear any clothes made of two different kinds of material. Right, dad?" Jon looked confused. Matt looked at Jon and said "My parents and I were just discussing our knowledge of the scriptures and..."

Pastor Mike interrupted: “Jon, we’re in the middle of a family discussion here and we would like some privacy if you don’t mind. Was there something you needed?”

Jon was embarrassed and said back “Oh, I’m so sorry to interrupt. We were looking for you because we’re having some issues with the lighting and we were wondering if we could move some things around in the sanctuary so we could make things work.”

“Ok... how about I come see you after we’re done here, and we can talk about it” said Mike.

Jon said “That sounds great. So good to see you, Matt. You should drop by and say hi to everyone in the cast!”

“Actually, Jon, why don’t you stay? We could use a little Jesus in this room” said Matt.

Jon replied. “Well I’m not actually Jesus, Matt” and he let out a hearty laugh.

Matt continued: “I know, Jon. I just think it would be good to have someone else here to help us in our little family discussion. You see, my mom and dad were just about to give me a conditional proposal that could send me back to college, and I’d like a second opinion. Here, let me get you a chair.” Matt grabbed a chair and motioned Jon to sit in it, then closed the door. “There”, Matt said. “I feel better already. It feels good to have Jesus in the room.”

“I’m not Jesus” Jon said at the same time that Pastor Mike quipped back, “He’s not Jesus.”

Mabel interjected, saying to her husband “Honey, maybe it’s not such a bad idea to get a second opinion. Jon’s a nice boy and he’s Matt’s friend. Maybe he can help Matt make a good choice this time.” An awkward silence followed, and the smile on Mabel’s face quickly disappeared. If looks could kill, Mabel would be dead. Mike stared at her for what seemed like a minute but was only a few seconds of solid glare. She backed down and looked away, a bit ashamed for not backing Mike up.

Mike cleared his throat. “As I was saying, before I was interrupted, your mother and I have been discussing you going back to college and I am willing to reinstate your college funding, provided you successfully complete another round at New Beginnings.”

Matt said back sharply: “I am NOT going back to that place. Gay conversion therapy doesn’t work, dad. Don’t you get that? It didn’t work the first time; what makes you think it will work a second time?”

Mike said “Well, for starters, you didn’t stay for the entire program the first time...”

Matt interrupted: “Because it was ridiculous, dad! They were telling me to not feel the way I feel, and to not be who I am. And, by the way, that’s real nice of you to show me conditional love AGAIN. Jesus, what does the Bible have to say about conditional love?” Matt asked to Jon.

Jon’s eyes were as big as quarters. He didn’t expect to be put in the center of a family quarrel. He simply said in a soft voice

“I’m not Jesus” at the same time that Mike said sharply “He’s not Jesus”.

Matt was persistent and said “Ok, we know that, but I’d really like to hear from Jon now. What does the Bible have to say about conditional love, Jon?”

Jon took a moment and replied hesitantly: “Well, I’m pretty sure it says to love one another, and I’m pretty sure that there are no conditions put on that love.” Another awkward silence followed, and everyone looked back and forth at everyone else in the room for a few seconds, waiting to see who would say what next.

“Matt, your mother and I love you, there are no conditions on that. We always have and we always will. We just want you to come back into God’s family and stop sinning” Mike said to Matt.

Matt said back “First of all, dad, who I am is not a sin. And by the way, have you stopped sinning? Is your life so perfect that you have to concern yourself with everyone else now that you’ve reached the ultimate stage of enlightenment?”

“Son, I’m not saying any one of us is perfect” said Mike before Matt interrupted again.

“Exactly, dad. We’ve all got our shit we have to deal with.” Mike’s eyes showed anger at Matt’s language. Catching sight of this, Matt looked at his mom. “Sorry, mom, but I can’t think of any other word to describe this. We’ve all got something we struggle with. Believe me, if I could turn this off, I would.” Matt looked back at his dad and continued: “Do

you think I like being ostracized from all of you? Do you think I like how people are talking about me? Do you think I like working at a café instead of going to college?” Mike let out a deep breath in exasperation.

“Honey, we all want what’s best for you” said Mabel.

Matt continued: “I know, mom. I know you mean well, but why can’t you love me and support me without conditions? Why must you insist on dragging me through this therapy stuff for a second time and have this college funding dangling in front of me like a god damned carrot?”

Mike shot back: “Matthew, this is the Lord’s house and I will not stand for you taking the Lord’s name in vain here.”

Matt replied “Dad, I am NOT going back to New Beginnings. If you say that I must go to there in order to go to college, well, then, I guess I’m not going to college.”

Mike continued, “Matthew, I just don’t understand you. Your brothers and your sister don’t have this – this – thing you have. Why must you be so difficult? Why must you disobey your mother and I and go against God’s word?”

Matt looked back at his dad and said very sternly “Because I’m gay, dad. Face it. I’m not like Mikey, Luke and Sarah. They’re not gay. I am. It’s time you and mom face it. I’ve known since I was a kid, and I’m pretty sure you’ve known all this time that I was different. I am fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, dad. I’m just made differently than you thought I’d be. Maybe it’s not me that needs to change;

maybe it's your image of God. Have you ever considered that?"

Jon spoke up: "Can I say something?"

"You're not Jesus!" Mike shot back, obviously getting frustrated as this was going nowhere. Mike took a deep breath to calm down.

"Go ahead, Jon" said Matt.

Jon continued: "It's just that... well, it seems like things are going nowhere in this conversation and I'd like to make a suggestion."

Mike replied reluctantly: "Fine. Go ahead."

"Ok, thanks, Pastor Barnes" said Jon. "We've got this Easter play going on this week and our director did this thing with us when we first met each other at the first read-through. She asked us to answer two questions. I just think it might be a good thing to do here with you guys."

Matt said: "Cool. Two questions. Let's do this."

Jon continued: "Ok, the first question is this: what is the one thing about you that you want EVERYONE to know."

A moment of silence followed. Mike looked perturbed. "That's it? What one thing do we want everyone to know about us? That's supposed to help us here?" Mike said.

Jon said back “No. It’s just the first question. Let’s all answer that and then we’ll get to answer the second question. I think the second question is the one that may help. Here, I’ll go first. The one thing I want to everyone to know about me is that I absolutely love theater and all my theater friends, and I wouldn’t trade the moments I spend with them for anything else in the world.”

“God’s got you right where He wants you, Jon. That’s wonderful” said Mabel.

Jon replied: “Thanks, Mrs. Barnes. How about you? What do you want everyone to know?”

Mabel replied: “Me? Well, let me think... I suppose I’d like everyone to know how much I love my women’s book club we have. It really is the highlight of every week and I so look forward to that time with my friends.”

Jon said “That’s awesome. I’m glad you’ve found something that makes you so happy. Mr. Barnes? What about you?”

“It’s Pastor Barnes, Jon” Mike said.

“Sorry, Pastor Barnes. What about you?”

Mike stared in the distance for a few moments and said “I suppose if there was one thing I’d like the whole world to know about me, it’s that I feel called to make sure that everyone knows God’s word and I feel compelled to help them apply it in their everyday lives.”

Jon said back: “And thank you for that, Pastor. I think we all appreciate your passion for what it is you do for all of us. Matt? What about you?”

Matt took a deep breath and pondered his answer. “I want everyone to know that I love them no matter what; that I am a deeply emotional person and I genuinely care about all people, no matter who they are or where they come from. I. Love. Everyone. Unconditionally. There, that’s what I want everyone to know.”

“That’s awesome, Matt. I’ve always loved that about you. That, and you’re a hugger, and I love hugs” said Jon.

Matt said back: “Awe thanks, can I get a hug now? I think I need one.” Jon and Matt shared a long hug and then sat back down. “Thank you, Jon” said Matt.

“No problem! Ok... now comes the second question. Are you ready?” said Jon.

“Bring it” said Matt.

Jon continued: “The second question is this: what is the one thing about you that you’d want NOBODY to know. What is the one thing about you that you would want nobody else to find out?”

There was a long silence. Pastor Mike broke the silence: “You mean you want us to share our deepest, darkest secret? I think those should be reserved between us and God, who knows us down to the very hairs on our head.”

Jon continued: "It doesn't necessarily mean it's a secret. It's just something that you'd rather not share with anyone else. Perhaps something you're ashamed of or would be afraid of sharing with anyone else for fear of them looking at you differently or judging you."

There was another long silence as everyone contemplated what – if anything – they were going to say.

Jon said "Who wants to go first? Matt? Would you like to break the silence?"

Matt looked up at Jon, a little shocked that he called him out first.

"Ok, I guess" was Matt's reply. "This is hard. I mean, there's lots of stuff I've done over the years and I'm trying to figure out what one thing I know about me that I wouldn't want anyone else to know." After a long pause, Matt finally said "I guess there is the fact that I lost my virginity to Tiffany George in 8th grade."

Pastor Mike was shocked. "WHAT? You had sexual relations with Pastor George's daughter?"

"Hey, sorry, I'm just trying to answer Jon's question, dad" said Matt.

Mabel interjected: "Matthew dear, maybe you're not gay after all, if you had sex with a girl."

"Thanks mom but I'm still gay" said Matt. Once again, Pastor Mike's look on his face said it all. The look of death. Again.

“Where was this? Does Pastor George know?” said Mike, not wanting to go forward with anything until he got to the bottom of this particular piece of scuttlebutt.

“I don’t know, dad. I’ve got so many skeletons in my closet; I just picked that one randomly” said Matt.

Pastor Mike continued: “Well I think we need to sit down with Pastor George and his daughter and get to the bottom of this... this sin, which has apparently not been confessed or atoned for.”

Jon interrupted: “Pastor Barnes, with all due respect, this exercise isn’t about getting anyone in trouble.”

Mike quipped back: “Then what is this about? I don’t like where this is going. I just don’t think it’s right.”

Jon continued: “I know it’s uncomfortable for everyone, but I’m hoping after we’re all done, you’ll see the point of all of this. How about you, Mrs. Barnes? Anything you’d like to NOT share with everyone?”

Mabel looked down and whispered “oh my” a few times. “I don’t want to get in trouble”, she said. She turned to Mike. “Will you promise not to be mad at me, no matter what?” she asked. Mike stared at her for a few moments and begrudgingly said “I promise not to be mad at you. Go ahead.”

After a short silence, Mabel stood up and announced with glee: “I... I love wine! All kinds of wine – the reds, the whites,

the blueberries, the strawberries, the sweets, the bolds – I love them all!” and then she sat down. “There, I’ve said it.”

Mike turned to her and was confused. “You love... wine? Since when have you had wine? You’ve never drank any alcohol in my presence.”

Mabel looked up. “Oh, you know those book club meetings I go to every week? Well, we don’t really read books. We just try different wines and talk about reading books. Or talk about other stuff. Anything, really. Not gossip, of course... we just like to drink and talk. Drink and talk... with wine.”

Mike stared at her with big eyes. “Promise me you’re not mad at me?” asked Mabel.

Mike said “No, I’m not mad. I’m just... well, I’m kind of in shock. You and Sally and all those ladies from the choir are part of this book club. That’s who you’re talking about?”

“Yes” was Mabel’s reply. “Are they going to be in trouble?” she asked.

“No, I’m not mad; they’re not in trouble. It’s just that... it makes sense to me now why you all love those book club meetings so much” said Mike.

“Oh, good” said Mabel. She continued: “Because our next meeting is tomorrow and boy, I can’t wait to see the looks on their faces when I tell them that you know about it now.”

Matt piped up and said “Mother, may I come to your book club sometime?”

“Oh yes! Please do! The ladies would love to see you; they’re always asking how you are doing.”

Jon chipped in: “What about Jesus? Is Jesus invited?” and they all shared a laugh. Jon continued, “I can save you a fortune by making water in to wine” and they all laughed again. “And yes, I know, I’m not Jesus” he said as he looked over at Mike.

Mike replied “Yes, I know. You’re not Jesus.”

There was a long silence. Matt broke the silence by saying “What about you, dad?”

Mike snapped out of it, almost like he was in a trance.

“What?” he asked.

Matt continued: “What about you – is there anything you’d like to share?”

Another long silence. Mike looked down at the floor and it was apparent that he was getting emotional. Matt reached out his hand and started rubbing his dad’s back.

“It’s ok, dad” Matt said.

Mike finally looked up. “I’m not proud of what I’m about to say... but this has been on my heart for a long time and I feel like the spirit is telling me to confess something to you all right now” he said. He looked up at Mabel. “Mabel. I have been unfaithful to you in my marriage vows. I do want you to

know that this happened a while back and it is completely over with and I am so sorry” he said, as he began to weep. “I am so sorry that I ever thought there was anyone but you that I could be with. I am ashamed and I humbly ask for your forgiveness. I truly am so sorry about this. I can assure you that it is over, and it really was the one thing I never wanted you to find out about.”

Mabel paused and took it all in. After a deep breath she said “I know, Mike. I know about you and Darcy.”

“You do?” Mike said, in shock.

“Yes, she does, and I do too” said Matt.

Mike looked at both of them with eyes wide open. Mike said “But... how? How do you know?”

Matt replied “Mom and I saw you and Darcy at a restaurant. You didn’t see us because we were back in a corner, but we saw you. Mom was sneaking out to see me, against your wishes, and here you were sneaking out on mom. That’s why we didn’t say anything at the time.”

Mabel said “I confronted Darcy shortly after that, and she confessed to me. She said it had been going on for several months, but she was going to end it, and she did.”

Mike stood up and looked at Mabel and Matthew. “I am so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?”

Mabel and Matthew stood up and the three joined in a group hug. “We forgive you” they said, and they all shared a moment together.

Jon piped up: “Can Jesus get in on this hug too?” he said. They laughed and welcomed him into the group hug as Mike said, “Come here, Jesus”.

As they finished hugging, Mike said “So, wait. You knew about this all along and said nothing to me? Why?”

Matt said, “We knew you’d do the right thing eventually.”

Mabel chimed in “We knew you’d come out to us, so to speak.”

“Nice choice of words mom” was Matt’s reply, and they shared a giggle.

Mike continued: “You knew this, and you didn’t use it against me?”

Matt said “It’s called grace, dad. We were showing you some grace until you came around. We knew you would do the right thing, eventually.”

They stood there in silence for a moment. Mike broke the silence by saying “I’m sorry Mabel. I’m sorry I hurt you and I’m sorry you’ve lived with this for so long. I don’t deserve you... but I’m glad you’ve stuck with me. And Matthew...” Mike put his hand on Matthew’s shoulder gently and continued: “Matthew, I’ve been unfair to you. I know you’re not like your brothers and your sister. I’ve known for a long

time that you were different. I just thought... I thought I could change you. That someone – or something – could change you. I've been holding this college thing over your head until you could straighten yourself out."

Matt replied "I'm definitely not straightening myself out, dad" with a laugh.

Mike laughed too and said "I know, son, I know. I've known for a long time; I just haven't been able to reconcile all this with myself, I guess. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course, dad. I love you no matter what" was Matt's reply.

Mike said "I love you too, no matter what. Consider your college fund re-instated".

There were cheers from Matt, Mabel and Jon as they heard the news.

"Thanks, dad" said Matt, and they all hugged again.

Mike suddenly looked up and said, "Wait a minute... Jon, also known as Not Jesus... you never answered the question for you."

"What?" was Jon's reply.

Mike said, "You never said what the one thing was that you didn't want anyone to know."

"Oh, right" said Jon. "I'm gay. That's what I didn't want anyone to know. Well, until the director of our Easter play

gave us these two questions to answer at our first read-through. Then I knew it was time to come out, so I did, and I have to say that it has honestly brought this cast a lot closer than we would have if we hadn't asked those two questions."

Mike stood back and looked at Jon. "You mean to tell me we have a gay Jesus cast in our Easter play?"

Jon replied: "Well, Jesus isn't gay... but I am."

"I know, Jon. And that's ok with me. I know you're not the real Jesus but as the Doobie Brothers once said, you're just alright with me."

Jon said "Wow, Pastor Mike. You listen to the Doobie Brothers?"

Mike laughed as he opened the door to leave The Situation Room. "Jon, there's a lot about me that you probably don't know."

Mabel wrapped things up by saying "Is anyone else thirsty? I could use a strong drink." They all laughed.

As Pastor Mike was closing the door, he said off the cuff... "Maybe I'll come to book club tomorrow."