

The Real Tragedy

Wayne Waibel – 10/13/2024

You know – I stand up here week after week and try to let my words stay out of the way. It's no secret – preaching is about allowing the Holy Spirit into the process. Keep your thoughts to a minimum and leave lots of room for divine interference, if you will.

This particular passage in Mark has a host of tangible gems to focus on: the struggle with wealth that accompanies success – the progressive interplay between the rich man and Jesus – the disciples' confusion – the takeaway that with God all things are possible. But what jumped out at me was a tiny little descriptor that was more of an aside than anything, "Then Jesus, looking at him, **loved him.**"

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I suspect that love looked a little different in the first century than it does in its contemporary form. There's a good chance no one was asking what love was back then. Sort of like, "If you have to ask..."

When Mark writes that Jesus, looking at him, loved him, I wonder if he wasn't simply foot noting a tendency Jesus had whenever he looked at anyone, or was he making a particular effort to really empathize with this young man?

It does underscore the flawed nature of being human – our preoccupation with amassing and ultimately worshipping wealth. You start out with a desire to meet your financial obligations and end up accumulating riches and possessions. Now the real tragedy sets in – once you have stuff – you want more.

The Christian life provides no greater challenge than finding one's way forward with integrity and responsibility in the dark. The young man walked away sorrowfully, but who's to say he did not sell all he had, pick up his cross, and follow Jesus. Following Jesus can still be done with great sorrow.

Arguing with God, as Job and other Old Testament wisdom seekers did, can be an act of deep faith – certainly deeper than a passive acceptance of whatever happens as God's will. The question of why the good suffer and the wicked prosper is not new. "The first will be last, and the last first."

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Sometimes love is the aching hole in your heart when you lose a beloved spouse after years of building a life together. Sometimes love is the speed with which Jesus scrambles to fill that hole with grace. Sometimes love is the gentle tone of a child softly singing the alphabet song during the Pastoral Prayer for the People.

We get caught up in proper behavior and rules and orders and restrictions and pretty soon we're not so much living a life of love as trying not to do the wrong thing. Grace that is truly of God changes us and calls us into a new way of life.

Around twenty-five years ago it became clear to me that I would remain at the library until retirement, so I started thinking about what to retire to. That stream of consciousness rapidly landed on being a country preacher. That was the dream.

The practical application phase enlightened me to the reality that I would need to go anywhere and serve in whatever capacity I was called. As time went on and deliberate efforts were undertaken to prepare myself for a life of ministry – what that might look like fluctuated markedly at regular intervals.

By the time my preparations were closing in on done and done, the landscape couldn't have been more mysterious. I started exploring other ministry options. Then the Committee on Ministry called and here I am – living the dream I had all those years ago - precisely as I'd envisioned it.

One of two things is at play here. I'm either really gifted in the field of pre-retirement ambitions or with God, all things are possible. I'm thinking the latter.

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Despite the multitudes around Him and the demands placed on Him by the utter denseness of His disciples, Jesus remained steadfast to His mission. His perfection was not about power or purity, but about endurance. There were lessons to teach – clarities to persuade and miles to go before His time was fulfilled.

Jesus was hard at work preparing people for the kingdom of God. While He was certainly engaged in the business of saving souls, He was also preparing His disciples to carry on without Him.

I'm sure they were thinking, "This guy is barely thirty – He's got a whole life ahead of Him. Why does He insist on delivering these hard lessons to sustain us in His absence? We're just getting started here."

And they were more right than they realized. They truly were just getting started. Jesus, on the other hand, was moving toward a far more intense transformation than they could imagine. We must always remember; salvation cannot lie in mortal hands. It resides solely with God.

The good news is that as a result of the experience and the word and the life of Christ – the concept of the first will be last, and the last first was beginning to resonate with the twelve.

The truly remarkable dynamic in this for the disciples from our post-modern lens was as this love grew, so too did the risk from an oppressor determined to snuff it out. And in that climate of fear and very real danger – they prevailed. Love prevailed. It is its own strength and justification.

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Each of us in our own experience has had occasion to witness what love is. We don't always know it at the time, but I'm quite certain the opportunity plays out repeatedly. From the warmth of being crowned Homecoming Queen or King, to placing first in a chess tournament. From seeing an old friend after years of separation to getting to know your child as an adult.

God prepares us for an abundant life. Even so, we still have to have the courage to seize it. And if we do – great will be our reward. A life of love is challenging – certainly, but so very fulfilling. You get to watch people grow in the Spirit. You'll notice the passion and the resilience of people faced with total oblivion. A simple act of defiance becomes the sounding bell to a higher calling.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Good news indeed. Amen.