

A Bitter Cup and Other Blessings

A sermon on John 12:20-33; Hebrews 5:5-10; & Jeremiah 31:31-34 by Nathan Nettleton, 18 March 2018

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Message

The life that Jesus calls us too will not be found and enjoyed until we give up trying to engineer the life we dreamed we were supposed to be living.

Sermon

Just as I was sitting down to begin writing this sermon, my phone rang and I found myself instead in a conversation with one of my mates who is in the process of leaving his wife. He's not even really sure himself why he's doing it. It's certainly not a toxic or destructive marriage. It's probably better than average, and he knows that. But somehow it just doesn't feel good enough to him, and after several years of being unable to shake off that dissatisfaction, he feels that all he can do is jump ship and see what happens.

A number of the writers in the Bible use the image of marriage to describe the relationship between God and the people of God, and in tonight's first reading we heard the prophet Jeremiah using the image of a broken marriage to describe our frequent failure to embrace God's wisdom and live faithfully in the covenant relationship that God has committed to live with us.

In tonight's gospel reading, we heard a well known saying from Jesus, a saying that was also picked up in our first hymn. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." And he follows that with a similarly well known, though not very popular, line of application, "Those who love their life will lose it, but those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

What's probably less well known is the pain that Jesus was in when he said these things. We often hear the words on their own, and even when we hear the whole passage, the Apostle John words it in a way that doesn't convey very well the severity of Jesus's feelings. Just before these lines, Jesus says, "The hour has come for the New Human." And just after them, his next words are, "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

"Now my soul is troubled" doesn't sound all that angst ridden, but it is probably translating something that sounded more like, "Now I'm gutted." You see, although John doesn't locate this story in the Garden of Gethsemane, what he is telling us about here is Jesus struggling with the same gut-wrenching realisation that the other gospel writers tell us about when they tell us about Jesus praying in the garden.

Matthew tell us that in the garden, Jesus says, "I am deeply grieved, even to death. My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." It's the same thing, "My soul is deeply troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name."

Jesus, a man who is passionate about life, living it to the full and opening it up for others, is here staring his own impending death in the face, and he's gutted. He's not fleeing it, but he's sure not welcoming it. He's terrified, but he's still walking resolutely towards it. "Should I cut

and run, look for a way out? Should I say – ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Not my will, but yours be done Father. Glorify your name.”

Our reading from the letter to the Hebrews evoked the same image when it told us that “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears,” and that although he was God’s own child, it was through what he suffered that he learned to follow the pathway of life.

It’s in the midst of that anguished struggle that Jesus says, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life will lose it, but those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

He’s talking to us, sure enough, but he’s talking to himself too. He’s psyching himself up in the midst of a genuine struggle over whether he can go on. “Come on. I can do this. If I don’t go through with this, I’m just like a single grain, and nothing will come of my life. Not my will but your will be done. Come one.”

Jesus is also talking to us, as his followers. He’s telling us that we will have to walk this path too, and that this is what it takes. And part of our problem is that we often over-spiritualise that. We know that Jesus is facing a death by crucifixion, and we know that we are supposed to follow him in the way of the cross, but we know that we are not likely to get literally executed, let alone crucified, so we mistakenly end up thinking that it is just some relatively benign spiritual sacrifice we are making in living by some different values to most of the world around us. And while that is not entirely wrong, it doesn’t begin to get to the heart of the wisdom Jesus is trying to share with us here.

Jesus is also teaching us some practical wisdom for coming to terms with your life and finding the pathway to living it to the full. He’s telling us something all of us know at some level, but most of us keep trying to pretend it’s an aberration and we should be able to avoid it. He’s telling us that at some point, your life is all going to turn to shit, and that how you deal with that when it does will make or break the next period of your life. You can fight it or flee from it – “Father, I demand that you save me from this, that you take away this cup; I refuse to drink it” – you can rage against the injustice of it and look for someone to blame, or you can let go, surrender to it, grieve the passing of whatever it is that you’ve lost, feel the pain, and trust that the life you are letting go of will give way to a new harvest of rich fruit and abundant new life.

So what’s this got to do with my friend who’s leaving his wife? Am I saying that he needs to accept the death of his marriage and move on? No, I’m not. Quite the opposite actually, although that may be what his wife will have to do.

I think many people, perhaps especially men, walk out on marriages because they are unwilling to accept and embrace reality. Walking out on the marriage is refusing to drink the cup and insisting on staying in control of our own destiny.

All of us, at least once in our lives, reach a crunch point where the painful realisation begins to sink in that life is not going to turn out the way we have dreamed it would. Richard Rohr talks about this as the invitation to the deeper journey of the second half of our lives. He says that most of us spend the first part of our lives trying to build the successful and idyllic life we

felt we were destined for. We may not ever know quite what we expected it to look like, but we know when we haven't got there yet, and we know when things are definitely not part of the picture. And at some point, the dream dies. It all goes to shit.

Sometimes there is some tragedy that destroys it, but often it's just the slow painful realisation that life has taken a different trajectory to the one we felt destined for, and we are never going to become what we once dreamed we would be. The dream is dying before our eyes, and it hurts like hell.

It used to be fair to say that women typically coped with this better than men, because men were raised to believe that they could always control everything if they just tried hard enough, and so they weren't very well equipped for coming to terms with not being able to force the dream to stay alive and on track. That's why we often stereotype this crunch point as a male midlife crisis. Unfortunately, I think young women are increasingly being raised on the same message, and while I certainly applaud the increasing equality of opportunity, the message that you can achieve whatever you want is actually a lie, whether it is told to men or women, and it doesn't prepare us well for the inevitability of failures and necessary compromises.

If Richard Rohr is right that we spend the first part of our life working hard at building a particular life that we imagine to be our birthright, then listen again to what Jesus is saying and hear how it sounds now. "Those who love their life lose it, and those who give up their life in this world will keep it for eternal life." Do you hear that? Those who can only see their life one way, and who love that life and invest everything in building that life and try desperately to avoid giving in to anything that might derail that life, they will lose everything. Their life will be like a single grain of wheat that fails to sprout. Their life will come to nothing. But those who are able to tearfully but graciously lay down the dream, and let it die, they will find the gateway to a wonderful new journey of life. Richard Rohr calls it "falling upward" into the second half of life.

About a decade ago, there was a period of a few years where I was seriously in danger of doing what my friend is doing now and walking out on my marriage to Margie. It wasn't that things were particularly bad, they just weren't the picture I was clinging to in my head. And as long as I clung tightly to that picture, I couldn't see or appreciate what I actually had. All I could see was what it wasn't, and I nearly threw it away.

I wish I could say that one day I woke up to myself and realised how lucky I was, but I didn't. The truth is that I probably did what Jesus advises here in the most ungracious way possible. I just gave up. I chucked in the towel, but without leaving. I think I actually thought I was just surrendering to one of those stalemate marriages that is just a begrudging disillusioned truce. I thought I was sullenly agreeing to drink a bitter cup. But God, and for that matter Margie, are a lot more gracious than I was, and as badly as I did my impersonation of a grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying, it still worked.

When I let the delusional dream in my head die, and stopped clinging to it and investing all my efforts into trying to breathe life into it, when I let it fall to the ground dead, I was finally free of it. No matter how begrudgingly and ungraciously I had let go of it, I was still free of it. And when I was free of it, I suddenly saw the pathway of new life opening up before me.

And while there is a lot more to that pathway of life than just the marriage I share with Margie, the marriage I discovered on that pathway is pretty special. But paradoxically, that's not because it is radically different from how our marriage was before. The biggest difference is that I can actually see it now, because I am not blinded by an impossible dream of something else. That probably means that I was already in a pretty special marriage, but that I was incapable of appreciating it or enjoying it. Something had to die before that fruit could be borne. And if I'd walked out, I'd have never known it.

I could tell you that same story about several other areas of my life. I think I've done my version of falling to the ground and dying in order to bear much fruit in several stages over several decades. There are probably more to come. Most of the bits were done as begrudgingly and foolishly as the story I've just told you. Embarrassingly so at times. But looking back, I'd rather do it embarrassingly than not do it at all. The journey beyond is much richer than the first half journey with its impossible dreams and its egotistic striving. And I'm only just beginning. If I can keep learning that lesson, the journey will get richer and deeper and more fulfilling yet.

In two week's time, we will be baptising two people here. And in baptism we are telling this same story about giving up our lives, letting the old life be buried with Jesus, and finding ourselves raised to new life. Not only is there about forty years difference in age between the two candidates, but their lives have been so different that they could be from different worlds. Their experience of the story of dying and rising that is being symbolised in their baptisms will be quite different.

But the wisdom that Jesus is teaching here is for all. Don't fall for the stunted idea that the good news is just some sort of ticket out of hell. The wisdom Jesus teaches is so much deeper than that and, as his words here and his Gethsemane struggles show, hell may still knock us down a few times yet, but by the grace of God, the pathway of life is not obliterated by the worst that hell can do to us, it is illuminated by it that we might find it and follow it with Jesus all the way to the promised land.