

Of Mice, Men and Women

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

For we do not proclaim ourselves;
we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord
and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake.

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"
who has shone in our hearts
to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God
in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars,
so that it may be made clear
that this extraordinary power belongs to God
and does not come from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
struck down, but not destroyed;
always carrying in the body the death of Jesus,
so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible
in our bodies.

For while we live,
we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake,
so that the life of Jesus
may be made visible in our mortal flesh.

So death is at work in us, but life in you.

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June 2, 2024

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

I will begin this sermon by admitting to you that I do not have very much to say to you today, but I believe it will be just enough. In doing so, I will also tell you that I am well aware I am running the risk of climbing up on my high horse and that it is more than likely that I will be knocked right off of it. Which is fine. This is not my first rodeo.

As I am sure you have already surmised, after so many years of preaching I am more than willing to latch on to the least little thing, however tangential and seemingly unrelated to the text, *wring* it for all it is worth and *stretch* it as far as it will go in order to yield the next sermon. You may have also already surmised that I revel a bit in stirring the pot in order to get your attention at the front end if only to (mostly) bring the sermon in for a soft landing at the end. Nevertheless, always best to buckle up.

II.

I suppose it was inevitable that into our idyllic church life a little rain would fall. That it would be John Steinbeck who brought the storm clouds was a bit of a surprise, though. Seems that for the past several months there has been a bit of grumbling within the members of our church's Book Group regarding the year's final book selection.

Each year, in May, they pick the selections for the year to come by consensus. Last year at this time Ellen Grayson suggested that they read a "Banned Book"; though she did not know *which* particular banned book that would be. Finally, last winter she decided on Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck. This met with a certain amount of groaning and misery within the other members of the Book Group. Those who read it back in high school were loathe to read it again, and those who had mercifully escaped such a tribulation were dismayed to have it nevertheless catch up to them later in life.

III.

Apparently the discontent became so great that Linda was secretly enlisted to try and *dissuade* Ellen from her choice even as late as last month while Ellen and Rich were in Florida. This, of course, was a fool's errand as Ellen is a fairly hard charger; as anyone who knows her can tell you. So it was that *all* the members of the group dutifully read Of Mice and Men, and gathered last Tuesday night in Lorna's Lounge to discuss the book.

As is their practice, the person who picks the book also prepares for, and leads the discussion. I am told by my "mole" within the group, that Ellen thoroughly researched the book and lead a thoughtful and insightful discussion; particularly with respect to the reasons Of Mice and Men came to be banned. Published as a novella in 1937 on the heels of the Great Depression and subsequent Dust Bowl which ravaged an enormous swath of our nation, the book's vulgarity, racism, and treatment of women was too much over the line for many; both then *and* now.

IV.

To their great credit, and as an example of the value of gathering to discuss books, the members of the Book Group went beyond all the usual hubbub surrounding this book and did a deeper dive into how the book pulled back the curtain on economic injustice and the uncomfortable truth about how the poor are treated in society; both then *and* now.

Another example of the value of gathering to discuss books, and a real strength of our congregation, is the multigenerational perspective which can be brought to bear not just on books, in specific, but on life and our journey of faith through it more generally. As I understand it, 11 women were in attendance at last Wednesday's Book Group (which is a lot of people for Lorna's Lounge) ranging in age from their 30s to their 80s. Here, now, is where the story gets most interesting, and it is the reason I am relating all of this to you this morning.

V.

Seems that the evening's matriarch was Janet Stitt, who was born in 1938. Again, as I understand it, Janet shared her memory and experience as a child growing up in Canada in the early 40s and seeing itinerate workers out

walking the main road between Toronto and Montreal, long before there was a highway, with these folks occasionally stopping off at homes along the way seeking food, any form of work and, perhaps, a place to shelter for the night. She also remembers her parents being very welcoming of these folks; opening their door to them, providing food and, on occasion, allowing them to sleep in their barn.

While recognizing it was not I who had to pay the price, it seems to me that a story such as this, told by a woman in our midst who lived such an experience, was well worth the effort of reading Steinbeck this month for Book Group. For it is of mice, men and women I would speak to you today.

VI.

The title of Steinbeck's book is taken from a poem entitled "To A Mouse" written in 1785 by Robert Burns; a Scottish poet and lyricist widely regarded as the national poet of Scotland. In order to give you a better understanding of the connection to Steinbeck's title, the entire poem has been included as an insert in today's bulletin (and below). The poem tells the story of a mouse who builds a home in a field only to have it destroyed by a plow at some unexpected moment which could never have been anticipated.

Essentially, the poem is an ode of commiseration with the plight of the mouse, and a recognition of how the world of men and women, can be upended and forever changed:

*the best-laid schemes of Mice and Men
go oft awry, and leave us only grief and pain,
for promised joy!*

Which, I am sure, is exactly what those itinerant workers walking on the road past Janet Stitt's childhood home were thinking to themselves. A realization, I am sure, Janet also shared in living through such an experience.

VII.

In spite of the hardness of learning such a lesson, and the unfortunate frequency with which it seems to be taught, it is a lesson we human beings too often forget and too easily ignore. It is also pretty much the same lesson that the Apostle Paul is trying to teach in today's scripture reading from 2 Corinthians chapter 5.

Paul admonishes the reader to remember that we humans are but clay vessels, humble and vulnerable in much the same way as the mouse abiding in her abode in some far off field, and the characters in Steinbeck's book who are banished from home and bereft of livelihood. Within the fabric of these writings of the Apostle Paul, Robert Burns and John Steinbeck, we can detect a common thread being woven which speaks to the heart of the human experience. One which begins with thankfulness, runs to humility, and concludes in perseverance. As we are versed in theology rather than poetry or literature, let us pull on this thread from within today's text from 2 Corinthians.

VIII.

In the passage Paul reminds the reader that a light shines in our hearts that is the knowledge of the glory of God made known in the face of Christ. However, Paul is quick to point out, such an extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. Rather, it is a gift of God Grace made real through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Said another way, as people of faith we know *who* we are, *what* we are not, and *to whom* we belong in being loved in such a way. Our response to this, as the Apostle Paul well knows, should always be a sense of profound thankfulness and gratitude for what has been done for us.

Which, one would think, is about the easiest thing in the world to do. It turns out, as was said earlier, this is rarely the case. Too often we humans forget this and too easily choose to ignore it. Here, now, is where I climb up on my high horse.

IX.

Last Monday, Memorial Day, I donned my clerical collar and attended the Service of Remembrance in the Park put on by the VFW. While I recognize the event was not well advertised, I was *shocked* by how few people from the public attended. In fact, I would say the members of the Post, Auxiliary, Fire Department and Goldenaires who were there to sing, easily matched the rest of us from the public. Which, to me, is pretty sad showing, and an indication of a lack of thankfulness and gratitude for what others have sacrificed so as to allow us all the freedoms we enjoy.

I certainly have no interest in shaming anyone for not attending, nor am I looking to bully anyone into attending in future years. Instead, I share with this with you because it really put me back on my heels. I walked away from the experience wondering how it has come to this? Not just with respect to Canton, but in our nation as a whole?

X.

It seems those of us living in this country have simply forgotten *who* we are. We have lost sight of the fact that as citizens we *belong* to one other. So much so, that remembering and honoring those who *more than self their country loved* has become too much of a burden or a bother, and we have allowed ourselves to believe that busyness is a valid excuse.

More disconcerting, is that this reveals a disturbing trend in a American society. We have foolishly come to believe that we have luxury of only attending to our own individual needs. Not only have we forsaken the whole, we have come to decide that half of the whole, the *other* half, is somehow so fundamentally different than *our* half those others can be shunned. However, in so doing, we forsake the whole and ourselves along with it; regardless of which half of the whole we believe ourselves to belong.

XI.

We have lost a sense of humility, and along with it a sense of thankfulness. We have forgotten we are but clay vessels, and that the best-laid schemes of mice, men and women go oft awry. We deceive ourselves into believing everything will be fine if we just hunker down in our own little house set in the midst of field somewhere. While this might work for a time, and perhaps even a very long time, at some point it does not work *at all*. I fear, as a nation, we are inching ever closer to such a terrible point.

Some 200 years before Burns, an English protestant evangelical preacher and onetime Chaplain to King Edward VI by the name of John Bradford who, upon seeing criminals being led to the scaffold, famously stated, "There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford." Just a few years later, when Mary I ascended to the throne, John Bradford was burned at the stake for subversion.

XII.

In the spirit of John Bradford, I would now like to climb down from my high horse and see if we, ourselves, might get a little subversive...by the grace of God. Even with so much wrong in the world (and, really, has there *ever* been a time when there wasn't so much wrong with the world?) it is my very firm conviction that the sky need not fall and that all is not lost; not by any stretch of the imagination. This is not wishful thinking or an extreme form of pollyannaishness (yes, that is a real word). We *can* discover evidence for hope all around us.

The first step in finding hope is to *look for it*. Then, once found, we can begin to create it for ourselves and in this world of ours. For the Apostle Paul, such a hope is to be found in Christ. It is this hope in Christ that we, as a church, are proclaiming to the world, and to our own selves; and such a hope does not disappoint. God's grace is upon this place, and upon our world; and, if you are hearing (or reading) these words, the hope to be found in God's grace is upon *you* as well.

XIII.

With faith secured in the potential for, and promise of hope, the only real challenge for us is to stay in the race no matter how steep the climb and how far the finish line. We simply must *persevere* as the followers of Christ, and as members of this nation. In today's text, Paul says:

*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;
perplexed, but not driven to despair;
persecuted, but not forsaken;
struck down, but not destroyed.*

Even as we carry with us the death of Christ, the life of Jesus is made visible in our bodies, in our church, and in our lives. While in this tale of mice, men and women foresight might prove to be vain and best-laid schemes go oft awry, we are *not* alone. The promised joy of God's grace helps us to bear grief and pain; but only if we will bear the pain and share the grace *together*. Amen.

“To a Mouse”

by Robert Burns

Modern English translation by Michael R. Burch

Sleek, tiny, timorous, cowering beast,
why's such panic in your breast?
Why dash away, so quick, so rash,
in a frenzied flash
when I would be loath to run after you
with a murderous plowstaff!

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
has broken Nature's social union,
and justifies that bad opinion
which makes you startle,
when I'm your poor, earth-born companion
and fellow mortal!

I have no doubt you sometimes thief;
What of it, friend? You too must live!
A random corn-ear in a shock's
a small behest; it-
'll give me a blessing to know such a loss;
I'll never miss it!

Your tiny house lies in a ruin,
its fragile walls wind-rent and strewn!
Now nothing's left to construct you a new one
of mosses green
since bleak December's winds, ensuing,
blow fast and keen!

You saw your fields laid bare and waste
with weary winter closing fast,
and cozy here, beneath the blast,
you thought to dwell,
the cruel iron ploughshare passed
straight through your cell!

That flimsy heap of leaves and stubble
had cost you many a weary nibble!
Now you're turned out, for all your trouble,
less house and hold,
to endure cold winter's icy dribble
and hoarfrosts cold!

But mouse-friend, you are not alone
in proving foresight may be vain:
the best-laid schemes of Mice and Men
go oft awry,
and leave us only grief and pain,
for promised joy!

Still, friend, you're blessed compared with me!
Only present dangers make you flee
But, ouch!, behind me I can see
grim prospects drear!
While forward-looking seers, we
humans guess and fear!