

Heartache & Heartbreak

Genesis 17:1-3a

When Abram was ninety-nine years old,
the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him,
“I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.
And I will make my covenant between me and you,
and will make you exceedingly numerous.”

Then Abram fell on his face.

Romans 4:13-16

For the promise that he would inherit the world
did not come to Abraham or to his descendants
through the law but through the righteousness of faith.

If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs,
faith is null and the promise is void.

For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law,
neither is there violation.

For this reason it depends on faith,
in order that the promise may rest on grace
and be guaranteed to all his descendants,
not only to the adherents of the law
but also to those who share the faith of Abraham.

Mark 8:34-35

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them,
“If any want to become my followers, let them
deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake,
and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

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Genesis 17:1-3a, Romans 4:13-16, Mark 8:34-35

February 25, 2024

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

This is the second sermon I wrote for today. I wrote the *other* sermon because I thought *this* sermon, the one I wanted to write from the very start, would somehow be (how shall I say this???) something along the lines of “too much.” Not necessarily too much for *you*, just too much. I don’t know, maybe too much for *me*.

The first sermon wasn’t necessarily a “bad” sermon, I just could not imagine myself getting up here this morning and delivering it with any kind of enthusiasm. I couldn’t even say for sure if *you* would notice, but I know *I* sure would have. So, instead of talking to you about the scriptural and historical basis for Lent, I want to talk to you this morning about heartache and heartbreak. Which, if we stop to think about it a moment, is a pretty good topic for Lent.

II.

The past couple of weeks I have had two really wonderful interactions with the Church and Community Program, of which we are a founding church member and ever-stalwart supporter through our Mission Budget, Noisy Can Offering, Giving Tree and School Backpack programs, special giving initiatives (50 lbs ground beef/month for a year) and, especially, the leadership provided by our board representatives, JJ Jockel, Sean Boutin and Michelle Theisen. To the great credit of the entire Board, and as part of celebrating the program’s 50th anniversary, they are endeavoring to renew and strengthen their ties to the churches which support and help lead the program: Grace Episcopal, United Methodist, Good News Fellowship, St. Mary’s R.C., Unitarian-Universalist, and First Presbyterian Church on the Park. As part of this renewal, and as an important initial step, the board is inviting each member of the clergy, one at a time, to attend a monthly board meeting as kind of a “special guest.”

III.

I must be *really* special, because I got to go first. In the week leading up to their January meeting, I received all kinds of information from the Board president and various spreadsheets from the treasurer, all of which I dutifully read and analyzed; none of which we ever discussed. Instead, we just talked; for over an hour. Which was great. Which is what was needed. Which is what I had hoped would happen. Apparently, I was well-received, as the next day I received two emails, the first from the Board president:

Thank you for starting off our series of meetings with the clergy of our founding churches. You were great, and, aside from giving us a wealth of information on the past 25 years of the CCP, I think you were teaching us how to do this well with our subsequent guest clergy. It was also really fun having you there and I wanted to you to know that you're welcome to drop by any time.

IV.

The second email was from Michelle Theisen, one of our representatives to the Board:

Thank you for joining us at the CCP meeting, and paving the way as we reconnect with our church leaders and mutual mission. Your words of insight and good points to consider were noted and will be heeded. I like what you said for each of us to realize why we are there, and (to) be spiritually aware. You helped liven up the room and many said it was a fun and informative time. It was remarked that you have a more outgoing and humorous personality than many of the other pastors.

Which, I suppose, is something of a compliment; who knew I was such a “fun guy.” If we are being honest, however it is a fairly low bar to clear. Though “of the cloth,” the cloth out of which most clergy are typically cut is rarely “life of the party” kind of stuff. More on that in just bit.

V.

The other very wonderful experience I had with the C&CP took place this past week over at the Second Chance Thrift Shop, where a *really* nice crowd of people, both in quantity and quality, gathered for a 50th Anniversary cake-cutting photo op. Back, now, to the clergy, at a point, it was decided it was important to get a photo of the clergy present standing together in back of the cake; *why* this was important I cannot say.

While an argument can be made that we look like Bobblehead Dolls of The Pep Boys, Manny, Moe and Jack, it is, nonetheless, a pretty good photo. In it you will see me, Brett Johnson from the UMC, and James Galasinski from the UU. Each of us has a big smile on our face, and are holding a fork in our hand
(The idea for the fork was mine, the “fun guy.”)

What you would never know from the photo is that this was the first time I'd ever met Brett and, moreover, it was the first time in *years* that we, as clergy, have gathered for any reason whatsoever. That alone was a “win” in my book.



VI.

These two experiences, meeting with the C&CP Board and attending the cake cutting, caused me to realize (as if I *needed* to be reminded) that I have been at this ministry thing for a *very* long time: 30 years in the parish, with the last 25 spent here in Canton. While to some extent I will need to leave it up to you to decide how long is *too* long (and, please, if or when we get to that point you *have* to tell me) one thing I can say for sure right now, is that it

certainly has been long *enough*. There isn't much I haven't done, and even less than I haven't seen.

While I admit to some degree of satisfaction in recognizing the experience I have gained and, for the most part, in a job well done, the more sobering thought is that I cannot undo what I've done and cannot unsee what I've seen; this is what I have become, it is who I am, and how I orient to the world. This is what the heartache and heartbreak have made me. How much fun is *that?!?*

VII.

After the whole cake-cutting thing was over, I found myself alone with James Galasinski out in the parking lot (the weather was great). While we certainly have always been cordial with one another, if not outright friendly, this was the best conversation we *ever* had. It started off as all the rest, not quite like porcupines kissing but tending toward it. Then something changed, and it was overtly demonstrable.

I related that I had been speaking about him the other day (when I met with the Board) and said, "James is alright, he just needs to have his heart broken a few more times." More out of curiosity than defensiveness he asked, "What do you mean by that?" I said, "Oh, just the regular stuff of ministry; the living, the dying, the pain, the suffering. When all the doctrine and issues fade away and all that remains are the people for whom we care, and the heartache and heartbreak we share." With that said, I could see his countenance visibly change: his shoulders relaxed, his face eased, he understood and, moreover, we truly understood each other as colleagues (maybe for the first time).

VIII.

Later that day I got to thinking about the three sermon texts we have before us this morning, and about how Brett, James and I would almost certainly approach them differently given where each of us is at in our professional trajectory. I believe this is a first call for Brett or close to it. I am guessing James has been at it for 10 to 15 years. Meanwhile, for the "fun guy," it has been 30 years...and counting.

I can tell you, when I read in Genesis about God making a covenant with Abram I don't imagine Abram falling on his face out of gratitude or humility, I see a 99 year old guy having just been told he has a very long road left to hoe and simply being *utterly* overwhelmed by the thought of what now lies ahead. When I read Paul in Romans revisit the covenant God made with Abram, I spend *zero* time considering the workings of faith over the law. The only notion that concerns me, is the idea of *everything* resting on Grace.

IX.

Then, when I turn to the Mark passage and hear Jesus talking about talking up one's cross and following him, I in no way envision any kind of heroic faith in emulation of the suffering of Christ. Instead, I imagine just trying to muster the strength to simply put one foot in front of the other in the very modest hope of not joining Abram in falling on one's face.

Heartache and heartbreak change us, they form us into who we are and who we will forever more will be. Lent is that time of year when we create a space in our faith journey to acknowledge these changes that heartache and heartbreak bring to us in our lives as individuals, as couples and families, and as a church. A time to fall down on our faces, remembering that we rest on grace and grace alone, and seek the strength to carry our cross just one more step. *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

X.

Whereas that would normally be "Amen, end of the sermon," this morning I would add one final thought. While I was finishing this sermon on Saturday I received a text from Ruth Leslie, giving me an update on her father, Bill Webb. Earlier in the week he fell and broke his upper arm. This is third time he has been hospitalized this winter. It has been heartbreaking to witness how heavy the cross has been for him, and his family. Bill is dying and now on comfort care at CPH. I pray that God welcome him home quickly and gently.

One of the things I said to Ruth during our text conversation is something I've found myself saying quite a bit of late: that wonderful things can happen at the end...if we allow them. I suppose, more than anything, this is what Lent is all about; even if, at the same time, it simply feels to be "too much" for us to bear. Amen.