

Free at Last

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 13: 10-17

There are two fine novels, both written in the 20th century, one by a Roman Catholic, the other by an atheist, which interestingly explore the same issue. In *The Power and the Glory* by Graham Greene, the hero – or non-hero – is a seedy, alcoholic, Catholic priest who, after months as a fugitive, is finally caught by the anti-church, revolutionary Mexican government and is condemned to be shot. On the evening before his execution he sits in his cell with a flask of brandy to keep up his courage and thinks back over what seems to him to have been the dingy failure of his life. “Tears poured down his face,” Greene writes. “He was not at the moment afraid of damnation – even the fear of pain was in the background. He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him at the moment that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint, a little courage. He felt like someone who has missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted...to be a saint.”

In the other novel, *The Plague*, by Albert Camus, there is a scrap of conversation that takes place between two atheists, one of them a journalist, and the other a doctor who has been trying somehow to check the plague that has been devastating the North African city where they live. “It comes to this,” one of them says, “what interests me is learning to become a saint.” “To be a saint...learning to become a saint...” What do you suppose it means?

Frederick Buechner shares this story: “My family and I spend our summers in a house near the top of a small mountain in Vermont. We were sitting out on the terrace there one late afternoon with a couple who had come to spend the week-end with us. At a certain point, the wife looked out at the hills turning lavender the way they are apt to toward evening, and at the old horses swishing their tails around to keep off the flies, and then without warning she said, ‘There’s just one thing I don’t understand. Why on earth do you ever leave this place?’”

He writes that he wishes he could report that he came up with some wise and stirring and edifying answer. But, he says, “As I remember, I did not answer the woman’s question at all. I just made some kind of polite, vague noise; said some things that are more or less true. But her question continues to outweigh all my answers put together: ‘Why on earth do you ever leave?’ It keeps banging in my head like drum. I want to turn it around and ask it of the world.”

He continues, “Life is movement, heaven knows. We cannot say anything about it that is surer than that. We keep leaving one kind of time for another kind of time, one place for another place, one job, one world, one set of friends, for the next, and then on to the next after that, and so on until we finally come to the end of our time and the last of our places. Whether the things we leave are pleasant or unpleasant, peaceful or unpeaceful, we never stop leaving them or other things. That is what life is. And the innocent question the woman asked is in a way as searching a question as it is possible to ask. Not all our ‘because’s’ ever quite seem to drown the out the great, persistent ‘why?’ Why have we, all of us, left to come to wherever we are?”

The college I attended, as do many colleges, had a Latin motto. I never pay much attention to them. But as I was reflecting on this sermon I came upon this motto from a boys’ school in the East. Not being a Latin scholar, I’ll just share the English translation: “Come to this place, little boys, in order to become men.” Because preachers are always meddling with texts, I would like to meddle with this one just a bit, to the extent of making it read, “Come to this place all of you – come to whatever place you choose – in order to become human beings.” “Why on earth do you ever leave this place?” Could it be that the deep, unconscious motive behind all our comings and goings, our leavings and arrivings, behind all the scurrying around of our lives is this...the hope of becoming a human being, of discovering more and more what it means to be more fully human? Perhaps even the hope of “learning how to become a saint?”

I think of a reflection on her own life by Barbara Brown Taylor: “In my life, I have been a baby sitter, an Avon lady, a cashier, a cheese-packer, a horseback riding instructor, a nursing unit clerk, a cocktail waitress, a secretary, a newspaper reporter, an editor, a fund-raiser, a special events coordinator a teacher of creative writing, a hospital chaplain, a pastor, a preacher, and a college professor...and those are just the jobs I have been paid for. (sounds a bit like our younger daughter, Becky!) And I still have not given up on becoming a chef, a jewelry maker, a travel writer and a zookeeper.

“I have no defense for this largely frivolous list except that every job I have ever worked has brought me into contact with a crowd of people I might never have discovered any other way.

Every job has required me to learn things that have opened up whole new dimensions of reality to me. Every job has revealed some ability I did not know I had, just as it has exposed some clumsiness I was pretty sure I did have. While I was a cocktail waitress, I once spilled an entire Singapore Sling down the back of an Australian woman's red fox coat....Every job gave me ample opportunity to choose kindness over meanness. Every one of offered me the chance to recognize the divine in human form, inviting me out of myself long enough to engage someone whose fears, wants, loves and needs were at least as important as my own. Of course, they also gave me ample opportunity to act like a jerk, missing my purpose by a mile. Yet even this turned out to be helpful, since recognizing my jerkdom is how I remembered that is not who I want to be."

She concludes, "Call me a romantic, but I think most people want to be good for something. I think they want to do something that matters, to be part of something bigger than themselves, to give themselves to something that is meaningful instead of meaningless."

Why do you ever leave this place? To become men, the Latin motto says, which is to become human beings. To find meaning, says Taylor. To become saints, says this odd pair of novelists. Could they all be one and the same? Again, could it be that beneath all our yearning, all our coming and going, lies our yearning for this kind of life...for a fuller humanity, for becoming a saint? But what does it look like? How do we find it?

I think of Alice, drowning by the fire with her cat, noticing that the looking glass over the mantle has a curious look to it. So she climbs up on the mantle to see, and sure enough, the glass starts to melt away and she steps through it into a new world. Or the children stepping into an old wardrobe and finding themselves in the land of Narnia. Or Dorothy being picked up and transported to the land of Oz. The fairy tale world that they all stepped into was very different from the world they normally lived in, but the point seems to be that they did not have to go a great distance to enter it any more than you have to go a great distance to enter the world of dreams...It might be more accurate to say that the world of the fairy tale found them and found them in the midst of their everyday lives in the everyday world...You enter the extraordinary by way of the ordinary. Something you have seen a thousand times you suddenly see as if for the first time, like the looking glass on the mantle, and a new world opens up and things begin to happen that in the ordinary world of where you live your lives, couldn't possibly happen. Isn't this the Gospel? Isn't this the story Jesus tells?

There is the merchant who spends his life searching for fine pearls until finally he comes across one of such splendor that he sells all the rest to buy it. There is the man who is walking through a field somewhere when to his amazement he discovers a great treasure buried there and then, "in his joy" goes and sells all that he has to buy that field. "That's the Kingdom," says Jesus, "that's new life. And it's right here. Can you not see it?" And for those who do, the ones we meet in his stories, it is so much more wonderful than anyone could have dared hope, so much more within reach than anyone could have dreamed. And there is this sense too, that once we have glimpsed this kingdom, tasted this life, we understand that nothing else matters – that all other pearls, next to this one, are only pearls. Again, that's the Gospel story, a story that happened not just once upon a time, but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still.

There is only one thing that really counts the tired priest says to himself...to be a saint, to be fully human, or, as Jesus says it, to enter the kingdom of Heaven. It is to live with our hands stretched out both to give and to receive with gladness, not with hands clenched, as if we are holding tight to a life that is always slipping away the more tightly we hold it. To be a saint is to work and weep for the broken and suffering of the world, but it is also to be strangely light of heart in the knowledge and hope that there is something greater than the world as it is. And more than anything else, perhaps, to be a saint is to know joy. Not happiness that comes and goes with the moments that occasion it, but joy that is always there like an underground spring, no matter how dark and terrible the night, a joy that knows that always, there is a light that shines – there really is a treasure in that field. And, adds Buechner, "To be a saint is to be a little out of one's mind, which is a good thing to be a little out of from time to time. It is to live a life that is always giving itself away and yet is always full....This is our real business in the world."

Why do you ever leave this place? Why the yearning, why the searching? To be a saint? We are so much more than simply men and women of the world, sharing the sad unbeliefs of the world. God's world is ablaze with miracle, and God only knows when and where we will discover that pearl we cannot live without, the one that changes everything. If it our secret purpose to become saints, then know it is the ultimate purpose of God to make us saints, to catch us up into the wonder and miracle of a wild and joyful promise, a Gospel of high magic and deep mystery, that quite simply, is too good not to be true.