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April 12, 2009

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That's Not How the Story Ends

Matthew 26: 14-16; 69-75

A famous French film director and a good friend were arguing about the value of modern cinema, the friend complaining that modern movies were confusing to watch because they muddled the plots. He asserted, "A story ought to have a beginning, a middle and an end."

The famous director replied, "Yes of course! But not necessarily in that order!"

That director's observation has great applicability to life:

we experience beginnings, middles and ends amidst life *but not necessarily in that order.*"

We assume that we know and understand the narrative of our lives;

we think that we can know when events constitute our beginning, our middle and our end.

But we don't. We can't. Only as we examine events in hindsight do we grasp their meaning and context amidst the overall narrative of our lives. Only upon review can we recognize how events and circumstances inform the beginning, middle and end of our lives and bring them into focus.

The Bible tells of numerous people who undertake actions in the expectation that they will bring certain stories to an end, only to find that they have created not an ending, but a beginning.

Consider the story of Joseph. His brothers, envious of his talents, resentful of his ambition, sold him to slave traders and faked his death, thinking, there, we have made an end of that little twerp.

But through the power of God, Joseph survived their stratagem and rose to a position of great power.

Indeed, Joseph's talents and foresight literally fed the brothers and kept their families alive.

The brothers were sure that once their father dies Joseph would wreak vengeance upon them, but Joseph said, "What you did to me you intended to be an evil that brought my story to an end.

But God made good out of it. What you thought was my ending was actually a beginning."

Think of Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son: a young man demanded his share of his father's inheritance, and upon receiving it went off into the far country to squander it all in immature fashion.

In a pregnant phrase, Jesus said that the young man then "came to himself."

He thought that the story of his status as his father's son had come to an end,

and he resolved to go to his Father to start a new life, not as a son but as a slave.

But when he traveled to the Father, full of remorse, bent on reciting his tale of penitence,

his Father fell on him in the midst of monologue and said, "Son, what you thought was the end of the story is actually just the middle. This is not how the story ends."

Think of the two professed followers of Jesus who thought they brought Christ's story to a conclusion.

Judas, dissatisfied with Jesus' leadership, desirous of aggrandizing himself, betrayed Jesus for a price.

Who can doubt that by so doing he thought he was bringing the story of Jesus unto an end?

How could he have imagined that his treachery would actually be the catalyst for a new beginning, not only for Jesus, but for all of creation?

Likewise, Peter thought that by his cowardice under pressure he had betrayed not just a man

but an entire cause. He wept bitterly in failure, thinking that he had brought a great movement to its end.

He remembered his boasting, "Oh, Jesus, others will deny you, but not me."

He remembered Jesus alerting him that the Evil One would tempt him.

He remembered how he foolishly shrugged off the warning.

Now he wondered as he wept how he could have been so stupid, so dense, so obtuse!

He was sure that his failure of faith had brought the story of Christ to an end

and brought his own faith pilgrimage to an abrupt and inglorious halt.

How could he have imagined that his failure under pressure would be the catalyst for his enlistment as a spiritual leader? How could he have imagined that his weakness of faith could provide an impetus for the founding of Christ's community?

We think that life is too complex and too mechanistic for the behavior of one human being to have any real impact, but our heart tells us differently – and our heart is right.

But our heart is not always right in the way we think it is right.

The actions of a single individual may have an extraordinary insight, but not in the way the person expected. What we think might bring a story to an end might be creating conditions for a new beginning.

The comedienne Gilda Radner, who died of ovarian cancer at age 42, published an autobiography shortly before her death in which she said, "I wanted to write on the book jacket, 'Her triumph over cancer,' or 'She wins the cancer war.'

I wanted to write the perfect ending, so I sat down to write the ending of the book even before there was an ending. But now I've learned the hard way

that some poems don't rhyme, some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end.

Like my life, this book has ambiguity.

Like my life, this book is about having to change, taking the moment, making the best of it without knowing what happens next. Delicious ambiguity!"

Delicious ambiguity!

Under the creative leadership of God, our lives are full of profound and delicious ambiguity.

We lose someone we love, and we are sure that our lives have come to an end – but that end may open us up to an entirely new beginning.

Some of our broken relationships may heal like a broken bone that grows back all the stronger.

How often a traumatic failure is the precursor to a great gain,

and how often a great triumph is the prelude to a devastating retreat. Under the leadership of God we can never be exactly sure of the meaning of a particular event in the overall context of our lives.

What we think is the end of something is frequently just the beginning.

I think of a particular young man who trudges home after having been fired from his job.

He has proved an utter failure as a businessman,

and he dreads going home to tell his wife that they've lost their only source of income.

He is sure that she will be furious with him, and he fears that his latest failure

will bring the end of their household, will bring the end of their love, the end of their marriage.

But he tells her the truth and upon his doing so she walks him to his desk and sits him down and points to his pen and says, "Now you can write." Now you can write!

With that failure and with her encouragement, the career of Nathaniel Hawthorne, famous author, begins.

What he assumed would be the end of his story was actually just the beginning.

Under the creative Lordship of God, who knows how that principle might also be true for us?

Jesus once made a particularly harsh (yet undoubtedly accurate) judgment about a young man's future.

But then even our Lord caught himself and quickly added, "And yet, with God, all things are possible."

The powerful grace of God has a way of transforming our endings into new beginnings, our devastations into events of regeneration and renewal.

The grace of God has a way of turning estrangements into reconciliations, our acts of faithlessness into opportunities for new commitment.

It is on the other side of Golgotha that Jesus says to Peter in the wake of his failure, "Peter, feed my sheep."

It is after he has squandered the inheritance that the son feels the Father clasp him to his bosom and exclaim, "My son, who was lost, now is found. My son, who was dead, is now alive!"

In the past few weeks I've reflected often upon Jonnie McLeod's incisive observation that we live our lives in chapters. *We live our lives in chapters.*

I realize that the chapter of my service and ministry among you is soon coming to an end, and I am writing the last few sentences in that chapter.

But I have come to understand that under the power of God, what seems to be an ending is really a beginning.

In truth, one can only be attentive to the movement of God's Spirit when one is not anchored to one's own agenda.

So many people have the *potential* to see God's Spirit moving in their lives, yet they are blind to it because they view life solely through the prism of their own agenda.

They go through life saying, 'This is what I want to happen. This is how I want my life to flow.'

God may be sending them all kinds of signals that they are moving toward an end that will pave the way for a new beginning, but they are so tied to their own agenda that they cannot see it.

Their agenda becomes a blinder that blocks their seeing the potential that God has placed before them.

If life doesn't happen just the way they want it, if it doesn't happen just the way they envision it, if life doesn't bring them just the conclusion that they intend, they think that life has failed them.

They don't want to commit to God, because they think God has failed them because God has not satisfied their agenda in the way they expected.

They don't want to trust other people because they fear that other people will disappoint or fail them.

Genuine faith teaches us to realize that just because God might bring one chapter of our lives to an end, what we regard as the end of the story is not necessarily how the story ends.

We would like our lives to be one smooth rise to accomplishment and advancement. It rarely is.

We want to write on our book jacket, "*He Succeeded in Everything! She Lived Happily Ever After!*"

But the profound, delicious ambiguity of life means that we are never sure where we are in our story.

In the ceaseless saga of God's work within our lives, our endings might become beginnings and our triumphs might become tragedies, and our tragedies might become triumphs, and our losses might lead to gains, and our anguish might become wisdom, and our failure might lead to faith.

You can never be sure of the meaning of any particular event until you allow God to lead you forward, *for anyone who is in Christ is being made a new creature.*

I would imagine that everyone in this room over the age of twenty-five has seen a picture of a Vietnamese girl named Kim Phuc.

Kim Phuc was the nine year-old girl who ran naked out of her village as jellied napalm seared her skin, victim of a bomb attack ordered by a US commander.

Virtually everyone has seen the picture of this little girl, her face contorted in terror, her arms outstretched in supplication -- as powerful and painful a photograph of war's brutality as has ever been captured on film.

Most of us have assumed that the picture marked the end of her story. But it did not.

The photographer who took that picture rushed Kim Phuc to a hospital, where she was treated for third-degree burns, her wounds so severe that every time they were cleaned and dressed she lost consciousness. Miraculously, she survived.

When the Communist government that took over Vietnam discovered she was "the girl in the picture," they predictably used her as an anti-American propaganda item.

Time and again she was forced to pull up her sleeves and show her deeply-ridged, scarred skin to visitors from around the world. But that's not the story ends either.

A small group of Christian believers in Vietnam introduced Kim Phuc to new life in Jesus Christ, *and if anyone is in Christ he or she is being made a new creature.*

Kim Phuc eventually went to Cuba where she met a young Vietnamese man who shared her faith, and on their honeymoon they defected to Canada, where they live now in Toronto.

Asked how she survived her incredible pilgrimage, she told an NPR interviewer,

“God has guided me, and I go by faith.” *But even that is not how the story ends.*

Some years ago, thirty-three-year-old Kim Phuc, the nine year-old who was nearly burned to death by an American bomb, walked to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., placing a wreath of flowers before that black polished granite in memory and forgiveness for those who had burned her.

As this frail young woman walked to that memorial

a sea of American veterans spread out before her and rose to their feet exploding in applause.

Many of them wept. As one veteran said, “For *her* to forgive us means something.”

She offered this testimony: “I have suffered a lot from physical and emotional pain, and sometimes I thought I could not live, but God saved me and gave me faith and hope.”

By the continuing creative providence of God

the little girl who once stood as a symbol of war now lives as an instrument of peace.

We call ourselves an Easter people, but do we really live with an awareness of the resurrection rhythms that are imprinted by God into our daily lives?

Do we truly live by the principle that if we are in Christ

every day God is at work within us endeavoring to make of us a new creature?

Do we appropriate the fact that God’s resurrection rhythms are available to us in every moment, making us a littler wise, a little more gracious, a little more effective as an instrument of peace?

Do we hear our Lord say to us, “Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy-laden.

My yoke is easy and my burden is light. Come unto me and I will give you rest.”

Our Lord does not want us to live lives of weariness.

Our Lord does not want us to live lives of frustration!

We are made by God to embark and embrace a brighter and more positive future!

If I say the name, “Robert Fraley,” I doubt you will recognize its importance,

unless you are an SEC football aficionado. He once played quarterback for the University of Alabama.

But his main claim to fame was as the sports agent for golfer Payne Stewart.

He died with Payne Stewart in the airplane accident that happened over ten years ago.

Robert Fraley was one of the people who helped lead Payne Stewart to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Orel Hershiser, the great pitcher, and a friend of Fraley’s, went down into Fraley’s personal gym

the day after his death to find this placard taped to the wall:

Train your body as if you were going to live forever,

But train your soul as if you were going to die tomorrow.

That about says it all, doesn’t it?

None of us know whether we are going or coming, coming or going, so

Train your body as if you were going to live forever,

But train your soul as if you were going to die tomorrow.

We don’t know where we are coming or going in life, whether we are living in a beginning, a middle or an end. We don’t know whether we are beginning or ending a chapter in our lives.

All we can really know is with whom we go.

If we go through life depending on our own strength, living by our own plan, focused on our own agenda, we will end up as bitter, frustrated, empty people.

But if we go on our journey with Christ, we will find that Christ’s yoke is easy, and our burdens are light.

We will find that if Christ is within us everyday, then God’s Spirit is at work within us daily, making us a newer and newer creature in Christ Jesus.

If we are about that process, then God will eventually lead us to become the kind of people we are meant to be.

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May 17, 2009

