

“We Have Only Done What Is Our Duty”

Luke 17:1-10

As Pastor Mike Burdick from Macomb has accepted the call to serve St. John’s Lutheran Church in Effingham, which is part of my old circuit when I was in Pana, I was thinking about some of my brother pastors which are still there, and some who are not. One in particular who is no longer there is Pastor Rich Bremer. He was the pastor at Stewardson, IL which was one of the geographically closer churches to Pana. When I left Pana to come here, Rich had been struggling with cancer the past couple years.

The last time that I talked to him, there was no more the doctors could do other than keep him comfortable. I remember shaking his hand, looking him in the eye, and telling him, “It has been a pleasure to serve with you.” The words at the end of our Gospel reading about “doing our duty” (I remember) were mentioned.

I can’t tell you exactly what I said, but I remember exactly what he said. Rich said, “I know. But I am going to miss my family.” He paused and confidently included, “But only for a while.” Then we parted ways and now I am in Quincy and he is with the Lord.

As I thought about what Rich said about his family, I was reminded of something that has been a topic of discussion in Bible classes and personal conversations throughout my ministry. It is implied and

understood that this sinful world will not be remembered in the life to come. And the question is, “What does this mean?” Is this a complete blotting out of all memory of this life – because, as everything that we do or touch in this world is tainted by sin, will we remember this sinful life. God is very specific that He will remember our sins no more, and that our sins will not be remembered against us. Why would we remember anything that is sinful?

However, through the years, I am leaning more and more toward the argued point that the trouble, the difficulty, the sin of this world and the pain that it brings will be remembered in a similar way that those who went through the Great Depression tend to remember those years. It was hard; it was difficult, but they speak of it with a twinkle in their eye. If you did not live those years, ask someone who did. Listen to how they speak of overcoming hardship. They tend to call it “The good old days.”

WWII veterans go on Honor Flights. Life in the European or Pacific theatre was no picnic. There was real suffering. Those years are remembered with pride, honor – even joy. The strength to persevere in the face of real pain and difficulty is often our greatest source of joy. They are proudly called “The Greatest Generation.”

Why do you think that these Spartan Mud Run Obstacle Course races are popular? No matter how hard it is, the goal is to finish the race. Then you look back and find joy. The more I study this, the more I am convinced.

In the Upper Room, Jesus speaks of the struggles, hardship, and pain of this life as the beginning of birth pains. When the birth pains end, there is a new and joyous life that comes forth. Many have said that when the child comes, you forget the birth pains. (As I have told you before, I personally know of a mother who has told me that you do not forget, as she gave birth to two daughters without the benefit of painkilling drugs – not by choice but by circumstance. Proving again that no analogy is perfect).

However, the point of all this is that our memory in heaven being a total blank slate may not fit with the biblical model. The saints in heaven clothed in white robes, washed in the blood of the Lamb, worshiping and praising Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, seeing the scars of nail marks in His hands and feet – the piercing in His side. This would all be very confusing to the saints if they did not know that they had come out of the “great tribulation.”

Now, don't get me wrong. We will not dwell in eternity with painful memories of this life. Mothers will forget the pain of childbirth (ALL mothers). But I am convinced that mothers will not forget that they have children. You will forget the pain of those who have lied to you, who have hurt you, who have wronged you. But you will remember the joy of this pain being overcome in Christ – which is why all the saints gather around the Lamb on His throne, as we see in John's Revelation.

If you are in pain today, you are not alone. Listen to the prophet Habakkuk: “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see

iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?" Every generation has expressed frustration and anger at this sinful world. Even the people of God, even a prophet of God has been frustrated with God that we do not see results here and now.

Families of the Great Depression fearing for their next meal did not say at the time, "We are creating joyous memories that I can tell my grandchildren again and again and again." Soldiers storming the beaches on D-Day or enduring the bitter cold of the Battle of the Bulge were not thinking about the joy of an honor flight. There was no joy in the battle of Okinawa or Hamburger Hill. There was real pain. But they served, and they did that which was their duty.

It is not in the here and now that we are going to feel the joy and receive the accolades for doing that which is our duty. We are reminded of our place within the kingdom of God. The Psalmist says, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" [Ps. 84:10].

"We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty." This is true for soldiers in war; this is true for soldiers of the cross. We endure the pain and burden of this world – all the time looking forward to joining the saints gathered around the throne and the Lamb. He still bears the scars in His hands, feet, and side where He paid for the guilt of your sin and mine. We are unworthy servants who have been blessed to be called to serve. Looking at the best that any of us have ever done, the most that we can say is, "We have only done that which is our duty." Amen