

“We Have Only Done What Is Our Duty”

Luke 17:1-10

I attended Pastor’s Conference in Lincoln, IL this week, Pastor Rich Bremer was there. He is the pastor at Stewardson, IL which was a part of my circuit when I was in Pana. I have known him since 2004. Rich has been struggling with cancer the past couple years. One of my other brother pastors from the circuit told me that there was no more the doctors could do other than keep him comfortable. Doctors estimate 12 weeks is all that is expected.

On Tuesday, during our afternoon break, I was heading out the door of the church as Rich was coming in. It was the first time he and I had any moment of privacy amid the throng of other pastors. I asked him, “Are you done with treatments?” In a very weak voice, he said, “Yes, now it is just comfort measures.”

I shook his hand, looked him in the eye, and told him, “It has been a pleasure to serve with you.” I paused and was trying to remember the words at the end of our Gospel reading about “doing our duty.” I had looked at the text in preparation for writing my sermon (but I could not remember the exact words). So I said, “The good news is that God has given you a vocation, and you have served faithfully. Even more He is giving you the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.”

Rich said, “I know. But I am going to miss my family.” He paused and confidently included, “But only for a while.” Then he continued into

the church and I walked out.

As I thought about what Rich said about his family, I was reminded of something that was discussed at our Spring conference. It is implied and understood that this sinful world will not be remembered in the life to come. And I have long argued that this means a complete blotting out of all memory of this life – as everything that we do or touch in this world is tainted by sin. 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, I am leaning toward the argued point that the trouble, the difficulty, the sin of this world and the pain that it brings will be remembered in the same 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.

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 joy, pride, honor. The strength to persevere in the face of real pain and difficulty is often our greatest source of joy. Why do you think that these Spartan Mud Run Obstacle Course races are so 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. (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 have painful memories of this life. Mothers will forget the pain of childbirth (ALL mothers). But 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, don't imagine that this is an empty message. And do not imagine that you are 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. 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. How appropriate it is that today we celebrate LWML Sunday. The work of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League is accomplished without accolades and fanfare. 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 the longest serving ladies of the LWML; this is true for the newest mothers who bring their children to be baptized; it is true for all mothers and grandmothers like Lois and Eunice who shared their faith with Timothy.

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. All that we have done is that which is our duty. Amen