

A Wonderful Life

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“And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home...” (Zephaniah 3:19,20).

The cemetery was old, a pre-Civil War resting place, laid out and built up with slave labor in anticipation of receiving the remains of the pioneering families who came to Texas during or just after the Republic. It was originally a church cemetery, though the little Presbyterian congregation had long since moved away and now all that remained was approximately four acres of black dirt on top of a bluff overlooking the Yegua valley. For years the cemetery had gone untended. Most of the graves were from a century or so ago, Confederate veterans and early settlers. Only a few were from the twentieth century, and, of these, one from the 1950s was the most recent. As a result of neglect, weeds and briars had infested the place, and large trees had grown over the graves. In fact, as late as 1985 the cemetery resembled a four-acre thicket more than anything else, full of ticks and vines and underbrush and those old, old graves whose stones were now leaning or falling down, — a spooky place.

About 1985 a neighboring Presbyterian church decided to clean up the place. A work day was held, and friends and neighbors came to pull weeds and hack down brush and burn and clear it all away. One member had a tractor and made short work of some of the larger vines and thick undergrowth. Soon the place began to look beautiful again, restful under the big oak trees. One could see why those early settlers had chosen it for a final resting place.

One of the men who came that day could not work. He was bound to a wheelchair and forced to view things from his seat in a van. A victim of multiple sclerosis, he had been infirm for a long time, and each day became a little bit worse. There would be times — weeks, months even — when his deterioration would appear to come to a standstill, but never did he improve, never did he regain lost ground. He was not going to get better.

But he watched us work that day and teased us, giving us directions and advice, and we loved it. Later, when the cemetery was rededicated, he was there with his wife. As we sang “Amazing Grace” and as the notes flew away on the wind, I looked at him and wondered, not for the first time, how he did it, how he brought so much grace and good cheer to us all.

He had not always been sick. A tall, rangy Texan, he was a son of German immigrants, that second great wave of settlers who came to Texas after the Civil War and did not move on but stayed and farmed and built up the land. A child of the Depression, he fought in the CBI theater during W.W.II and flew the “hump” many times — the “aluminum trail” he called it, because of all the crashes — taking supplies across the Himalayas to the Allied forces in Burma. He liked Glenn Miller and the “Big Band Sound” and was an enthusiastic and graceful dancer. He traveled some after the war, finally settling down in Houston, working for a large corporation and living a full,

active life. In 1959 he refused a transfer to New York, and shortly thereafter he and his wife decided to move with their two boys to the country. There they built a house together on land his family had owned. A provider, he was a man who did for himself, one unafraid to assume responsibility; a proud man, independent, capable, and wise.

In 1968 he began to slip and fall. Unaccountably, he also lost some of his hearing, and his body, which had always been his servant, now seemed to have turned against him, becoming his enemy, strangely rebelling against the simplest commands. Canes were soon followed by crutches and then, a wheelchair and then, finally, an electric wheelchair. The humiliations seemed endless. He could not dress himself; he needed a lift to get into and out of bed; he required a special chair to take a shower. He became what we have taught ourselves not to say but which the Bible, for example, does not hesitate to name: he became lame.

His business was pecans. Wholesale and retail. If you wanted to sell the pecans you had picked up out of your yard, he would buy them from you at so much a pound. If you wanted them cracked, he would do that, or if you just wanted to buy an improved variety, he would sell you that too. After he had bought a sufficient amount of pecans from allcomers, he would bag them and sell them to the shellers and big warehouses. He knew the pecan business well and, seemingly, could predict the rollercoaster-like fluctuations in price in advance. He was good at what he did and his business was profitable.

If you came in to do business with him, he would, after exchanging pleasantries with you, always look you in the eye and assert — no matter what the weather was like or what either you or he felt like — “It’s a beautiful day.” You might say in reply, “But it’s raining, or icy, or hot as Texas in August,” still he would smile and repeat, “Yes, but it’s a beautiful day.”

I saw this happen enough to wonder how a person who was not getting any better and who had a whole lot to be bitter about and for whom each day was nothing but a struggle, how he could say so confidently, “It’s a beautiful day.” Didn’t he know? Couldn’t he see? What made it more difficult to understand was that he was anything but a giddy optimist. On the contrary, his temperament was usually one of mild amusement at a world absorbed with its own follies, and quiet detachment in the face of the absurdities which he daily bore uncomplainingly. There was nothing remotely self-righteous or self-consciously holy about him. Indeed, he could sniff such nonsense from far off. Still he would say, whether you agreed with him or not, “It’s a beautiful day,” almost as if by saying that he was affirming his faith.

Pecans, before they are loaded up and moved, are usually stored in large burlap coffee bags, bags which, when filled, can easily weigh upwards of 100 pounds. When one of these bags is filled, its top must be stitched together with twine. Sometimes this work would be left to a hired hand to do, or occasionally one of his sons or even his wife would do it, but more often he would hire one of the young teenage boys in the church for this task as an after-school job. So it was that, around 4:00 p.m., the twelve- or thirteen-year-old boy would come in, put his books down, finish off a snack already prepared for him, and then get down to the business of sewing. I don’t know if there was competition for this job, but I suspect there was. Kids who wouldn’t rake leaves at home hustled over to sew burlap bags before his watchful eyes.

That was part of his secret. Children loved him and trusted him implicitly, even quite small children. He would talk to them, ask about their school work or teachers,

and tease them about their girlfriends or boyfriends. Sometimes children are intimidated by the lame; a wheelchair can be a frightening object to a child. But they loved him. He knew, or at least could still remember, what it was like to be a kid: to want to go fishing on a hot day or see how fast something would go. And not only that, children trusted him because they saw him at church, saw him worshipping, sitting in his usual place against the back wall. He knew what it was like to have to be still for a long time, and that made him a comrade-in-arms in a way. So, after church, they would not hesitate to hug him or sit in his lap or help push him in his chair.

Anyway, a generation or two of young men in that church grew up stitching bags of pecans every fall and winter. And all of them grew up. Some went to college; others did not. Some are businessmen now themselves. One is a farmer; another is a cook. The course of their own lives has not been uniformly smooth but, rather, full of ups and downs. Still, they knew that they had learned from him something more than how to stitch up a bag of pecans. They had learned about work and ... hope.

Hope. We often think of hope as nothing more than something to look forward to: a trip to Europe, a Christmas homecoming, a new arrival. But all of those things assume that, in due course, what we want will come about. In truth, hoping for what we want is really more akin to wishing than anything else, or even setting some kind of goal, not an unimportant activity but not hope.

My friend was not waiting to walk again; he was not looking forward to that day when he could dance again to "String of Pearls" or "Tuxedo Junction." If he had ever wished for that, his wish had died somewhere between the crutches and the wheelchair.

No, what he was about was not wishing for what could never be, or even resigning himself to what he had lost, but hoping for more than he had ever known. Hope began for him in the wheelchair, not apart from that reality but embedded in it. That was where it began. Every day. It began with the all too vivid reminder that he could not *do* for himself, that he could not stand up, that he could not make things right. It began daily in *defeat*. That is where faith and hope and love always begin. Every day. And that is how they become so powerful.

You see, when people are well, they find it easy to fall under the illusion that they can get by with mere wishing, that if they wish hard enough and work hard enough, they will preserve their own lives, be their own saviors, succeed. And often they are right. They do succeed in a way; they "have their reward" as Jesus tells us. Only they lose hope. Walk down the streets of one of our major cities. The skyscrapers are beautiful, stirring even, making a powerful impression on those who see them soaring to reach heaven. Only, the streets are empty or, worse, uninhabitable. It is difficult for people to live there. It is hard to sustain a neighborhood there. Schools and the disciplines of learning suffer there. The streets themselves have become hopeless places.

We are a wealthy society, a society of achievers. That is not to be laughed at. But having achieved so much, we find, strangely, that we hope for less: our marriages fail, our families disintegrate, our children become aimless, hardened, even brutalized. Unable to forge chains on our own desires, we find that we are becoming a nation of prisons, asking steel and concrete to do what we are unable to do ourselves.

Which is why hope is so much easier to discern from a wheelchair than it is from atop the Empire State Building. To be a person of faith is, in some sense, to have been defeated; it is to die, to have come to the Cross and confessed that what we have wished

for has only imprisoned us more deeply, that hope is exactly what we cannot give ourselves, yet is what we need to have any sort of life. How hard it is for us to admit that we are dying can be seen in how hopeless we find a wheelchair. It is terrible to behold and looks not at all like a gift. But only there do we discover an angle of vision which is able to perceive the Kingdom; only there are we put in a position of discerning, indeed, becoming the gift we would otherwise have rejected, the gift we would have missed.

What happened to my friend was that he became a gift. In a way, it was terrible to behold. It included wheelchairs and medicines, frustration and weariness, all of which, for him, were a kind of dying. Just so, he made a good death. Just so, he was raised, *each day*, to life, to be alive for others, to give his remarkable gift to them. He hoped for them. His hope was itself a gift which taught children and young men, all of us, in fact, how to hope with each stitch of a burlap sack, each daily effort to work and live and love. His hope made us hopeful about ourselves, perhaps the hardest gift of all to receive and the easiest to dismiss as cheap.

At the end of his life, my friend could hardly move any body-part on his own except the index finger on his left hand, a small movement which enabled him to push the lever on his wheelchair. He could not *do* anything, which made him useless in the judgment of many but a parable of the Kingdom for those who had been touched by his life. For his hope was not in his strength or power or skill. In the end, they had all failed him. His hope was in what many hold in contempt today: a love which is steadfast and remains faithful even into the valley of the shadow; an interest in those who can't, yet who do every day and then do it again; a laughter which punctures any pretense of self-importance but gladly accepts the gift of self from God's own hand, and so can, without anxiety, give that gift away. His hope was in the Kingdom, not some vast domain he had wished for, but, rather, in something no bigger than a little child or troubled teenager.

"Behold," Zephaniah tells us, the gift of Christmas is not a wish but a promise that "I will save the lame and gather the outcast and change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home...."

On a foggy, gray December day, six young men carried a simple casket to its final resting place. They had all, at one time or another, stitched up bags of pecans, and now they were rendering a last service to one who had taught them what it meant to hope. As the last words were said and the final prayer was offered, the sun's rays began to break through the clouds. I turned to one of the young men standing next to me and said, "It looks like it will be a beautiful day, after all, doesn't it?" And he looked at me and smiled and said, "It is a beautiful day. Already."