

Requiescat in Pace – Russell George Bailey

Isaiah 25:1-8

Galatians 3:1-14

Matthew 9:1-13

The first time that I visited Russ in the hospital he was in the ER at Redlands Community. He had been there an inordinate amount of time. It was that shift pain in his rib cage. His red cells were out of whack as well. The medical world seems to move slowly these days and Russ was on the receiving end of that glacial pace. When I walked up to his bedside, Russ seemed to be trying to relax and when he saw me he perked up. We immediately rehearsed the reasons for him being there, how he felt and what his outlook was – all standard stuff. It wasn't long before the conversation changed. I remember thinking to myself, "Well, this is curious. This conversation is more like we're at Hanger 24 having a beer than sitting in the ER." Do y'all know the difference between someone talking *at* you and someone talking *with* you? You may think that that is a strange distinction but every now and then I'm in a situation where I am talked *at* – New Year's Eve parties, reunions, clergy gatherings (yes, clergy gatherings). It's a gift; to be able to speak generously with folks; it's a gift. Russ had it in spades. Why is that? Where does that come from?

Russ had a marvelous blend of humility and joy. Love too, and we'll get to that soon enough. As the French say, Russ had *joie de vivre*, a happy spirit, a contagious cheerfulness. It was deep inside him. It was a stable trait, a defining characteristic. St. Matthew wrote a gospel account of the life of Christ. How Matthew organized the story of Jesus' life provides insight into Matthew the man. Matthew was a dirtbag, a tax collector. Matthew was also a child of grace, a redeemed sinner. Matthew places his call to be Christ's disciple immediately after telling his audience how Jesus healed a paralytic. For Matthew the man, those two episodes go together. The crowd was stunned when Jesus healed the paralyzed man. It all started with forgiveness. The Lord spoke definitively: "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2). The scribes were up in arms. "This man is blaspheming" (Matthew 9:3). Jesus had authority to forgive and He had come to use it. As a sign, as validation of His divine authority, Jesus heals the paralytic. Restoration of broken creation, mercy, compassion, new life – it was an epiphany! True God and true man, Jesus brings God's kingdom and the paralyzed walk.

Matthew puts his call as Christ's disciple on the heels of that episode. Matthew is telling us that he viewed himself as a spiritually paralyzed man who had been liberated from darkness, liberated from guilt and brought near to the Lord of Light. What do you suppose was the paralyzed man's temperament, his humor after he was healed? To be favored by God, to be set free from sin and death – what sort of humor does that inspire? Gratitude, humility, joy; what do you suppose was Matthew's humor? He had gone from being despised by his countrymen, ostracized, ridiculed (and you can be sure that Matthew felt that burden) to then being welcomed by the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Do you suppose that the paralytic had *joie de vivre*? Matthew threw a party for his dirtbag friends and Jesus was the guest of honor. I get the strong sense that Jesus was very much at ease in their company. "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13).

Grace; doesn't God's grace create in you a lightness of heart? Knowing that the Lord has redeemed you, purchased you by a supreme act of sacrifice, a sacrifice full of love, full of loving intent, and you are delivered from all the misery of your sin and your guilt – doesn't that create a profound sense of joy? *That's* what you saw in Russ. That biblical reality, that biblical truth is what was alive in Russell George Bailey, a real man, in real time, lived among us. Scripture says that we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). Russ knew, in his bones knew, that he was beloved of God. That love, that well-received love, gave birth to the humility you saw in Russ, a humility that deflected attention away from himself. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). That's a line from Philippians. That line is predicated on Christ's character. It was patently obvious, at least to me; Christ's character was truly alive in Russ Bailey.

It got hard. Life got hard, messy. Pain increased. Russ' physicality was taxed. And love bloomed. First principles came to the fore. God's grace, Christ's blood, and the love of his wife; first principles came to the fore. I saw it. I witnessed husband and wife being thoroughly concerned about the other as Russ' cancer advanced. It was a lot to handle. It was difficult. The colors in the painting of November and December were dark colors. But marital love reached its apex in those months. The last time that I saw Russ in the hospital was after a rough time in the ICU. He was in a "step-down" unit and John Mitchell was there. As usual, the banter was light. Then Russ got serious. Marriage and love and Jeanette – Russ gave a soliloquy that I'll never forget. He wasn't talking *at* us. He was singing *for* us. It was an aria of love. The cloud of death led Russ to sing of love, his love for his bride.

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ love the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27). The church is the bride of Christ, cleansed by His blood and made holy. Russ would gladly give his life for his Jeanette. A pure love, a selfless love, a love that takes joy simply by seeing the beloved profit – that is Christ's love. To claim us, Jesus had to die. It was not a common death. Crucifixion; He willingly gave Himself up to crucifixion. "Father, glorify your name" (John 12:28). Good Friday was messy. God revealed His authority on the cross. As true man, the Lord Christ could suffer. As true man, He died. As true God, Jesus' sacrifice defeated death. As true God, His victory extends over this whole globe. It was at on a mountain – Mt. Calvary, the Place of the Skull, Golgotha. Jesus unleashed His authority on a mountain.

Isaiah the prophet wrote of that mountain in the OT. "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever" (Isaiah 25:6-8). Christ's authority claimed Russ. Death and resurrection claimed Russ. The feast of which Isaiah speaks is the feast of Jesus' body and blood. Russ savored the sacramental meal of forgiveness which is served in this place. He joyfully received Christ's love and joyfully gave it to those he encountered, starting with his sons and his daughters-in-law, and his grandchildren. Russ' good humor was for everyone. Golf buddies, neighbors, church folk, coworkers – Russ was indiscriminately welcoming.

Imagine his humor, his disposition now. Beaming, full of life; like all of us, Russ saw our blessed Lord through a glass darkly in this life. Now Russ sees the crucified King face to face (1 Corinthians 13:12). Imagine his humor now. Jesus never spoke *at* Russ. The Word of God wooed Russ, courted him with grace. Russell hearkened to the voice of Christ in the Word, eagerly listening to the gospel that set him free from sin and death. We will speak with Russ in heaven. He has preceded us but we're going. Each of us is a spiritual paralytic who has been healed by Christ's authoritative Word. Even as we grieve, even as we mourn the death of our beloved brother, there is joie de vivre in Christ's church, joy of living, because Jesus is risen from the dead and heaven is our home. Jesus spoke with Russ and said this: "Truly, truly I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24). Joie de vivre, joy of living, Russ has it in full. Thanks be to God, Russ has it in full.