

Kevin John McMullin ~ Requiescat in Pace

Isaiah 55:1-11

Ephesians 2:1-10

Matthew 9:1-13

There's no two ways about it, Matthew was a dirtbag. Matthew was a tax collector. What that meant is that he took money from his own people and gave it to a foreign occupying force that dealt harshly, really harshly, with the Israelites. A traitor, a Benedict Arnold type, a self-enriching, hard-hearted dirtbag – that was Matthew. These tax collectors skimmed. These tax collectors lined their own pockets before forwarding the hard-earned money of those who scraped by to Rome, the superpower who was unjustly milking Israel for resources. A tax collector was a pariah in ancient Israel, for good reason. The only people who would consort with a dirtbag were other dirtbags (birds of a feather, and all that). So, it came as a head-snapping shock when the Son of God, the holy and righteous incarnate eternal Son of the eternal Father comes to Matthew while the dirtbag is sitting at his tax booth and says: "Follow me" (Matthew 9:9). That night the dirtbag throws a party and Jesus is there. Who else is there? All of Matthew's dirtbag friends. Holy God mingling with lowlives. The religious stuffed shirts don't like it. They harass Jesus' disciples. "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (Matthew 9:11). The Lord Christ replied matter-of-factly: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12).

I walked into Kevin's room not knowing what I would find. I knew that he was conflicted, desperate even. His buddy Ray had asked me if I could visit. And then Ray said the words that put pastors on high alert. "He's afraid that he's going to hell." When a pastor hears those words it's like a fire alarm, no pun intended. I didn't know what I would find but I walked into Kevin's room. A wretched cancer had laid hold of him. He was suffering. But there was a more austere enemy than cancer to address. "He's afraid that he's going to hell" lingered in my mind. And hell is no fiction. What's the remedy? For this fear, what's the medicine? There would be no "counseling." There would be no idle chit-chat, no small talk, no ice-breaking introductions. I told him who I was then I launched into a 2000 year old, 200 proof articulation of the Gospel. Over and over, one magnificent Scripture passage after another, reality upon reality, a flood of the richest Christian truths cascaded over this beleaguered man and I've never experienced anything like it. He finished my sentences. This troubled individual who is battling a tyrannical cancer has a command of God's Word that is beautiful. His faith is alive! And he fears hell. Why is that?

Someone had impressed upon Kevin that he wasn't enough. Someone had impressed upon him that he didn't measure up. And Kevin believed it. That was the austere enemy. The medicine was grace. Do you know what grace is? Grace is receiving something that you don't deserve and could never earn. We are saved by grace – a free gift of God. Christ crucified is grace. His blood being poured out for sinners, for dirtbags, is grace. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Love animates grace. God's love for people who don't measure up on their own. We're sinners. Lust and greed and pride and deceit and selfishness of an

endless variety – you and me and the world over, we’re sinners. This is a trustworthy saying, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief (1 Timothy 1:15).

Have you ever been conflicted, spiritually torn? Have you ever soberly examined your behavior and known that it falls far short of God’s very just, very objective standard? I’ve been there. Where do we find relief? Some turn to self-righteousness. Some turn to self-pity. Was Kevin either of those things? He endured three different types of cancer over the last 20 years. Humility, good humor, and a generous spirit – that was Kevin John McMullin. Kevin bore his cross with fortitude and trust. I saw a drawing that illustrated self-pity. Two ladies are out for a walk, dressed similarly, and one of the ladies is holding up a dark rain cloud over her head and only over her head. The rain is falling on her and only on her. The artist made sure to capture the essence of self-pity in the other woman, whose attention is naturally drawn to the cloud above the first woman, which is the first woman’s objective. Self-pity loves an audience. It can certainly function in isolation, but self-pity yearns to be affirmed. Self-pity yearns for validation. Kevin had none of that. His character wouldn’t allow it.

Boys in Kevin’s generation were taught that men are to be strong, courageous, self-reliant, tough. Kevin was certainly that. When one encounters something that is as menacing as an unrelenting cancer, those cultural lessons fade like mist. How many of y’all attempted to help Kevin carry his burden? That’s what love does. Fidelity, friendship, love – it extends itself to one in need. Humanly speaking, there’s a point at which our ability to help comes to an end. Did any of you experience a gnawing powerlessness to help? That hurts, doesn’t it? I guarantee that Kevin felt your fidelity to him. You assisted him. But where your ability to help ended Christ was there. Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you – that is the Lord’s promise. In the ER, in the hospital room, in the bitterness of cancer’s rage – the Lord was with Kevin. Not in some abstract way, but with Kevin in his suffering with His own suffering, with His death and with His resurrection. Christ was there, in solidarity with our brother, nursing Kevin’s soul with grace and hope and love. And Kevin knew it. That is the strength of character that dwelled deeply in this man. Christ’s character, Christ’s love, Christ’s grace – that is what made Kevin strong.

As you might imagine, I have been at the bedside of many sick people. It is an extraordinarily intimate service to provide, helping someone die. The body fails. In a multitude of ways, this body fails. I witnessed Kevin marshal all the strength he could, in his failing body, to endure. But there was something else. There was some other strength in him. I’ve never had someone listen to the Word more intently, more hungrily than he. Kevin was a sponge, a willing well that begged for the Word of God to be funneled in. The Word does not return empty but accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent (Isaiah 55). That is a reference to the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Christ is the Word made flesh, who ventured from His royal throne and took up residence in Mary’s womb, who took up residence first in a manger and then on a cross. The Son of God was sent for Kevin. God became Man to lay claim to Kevin John McMullin. Jesus accomplished the purpose for which He was sent. He confronted sin and death. He took sin and death into His very human flesh. That was the purpose for which the Word was sent. And He rose. Death could not hold Him; He rose. Death has no sting. Death has no victory. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Kevin died knowing it. Heaven in his home. Kevin is home. Follow me. So said our Lord to Kevin. Follow me into my death and resurrection. I am the way the truth and the life – follow me. You are mine. I laid claim to you by my sacrifice and my blood

has cleansed you of all your sin – follow me. I have prepared a place for you in my Father’s house – follow me. That is the loving Savior who took Kevin home.

My interaction with Kevin has been a boon to my spirit. I am stronger because of it. His suffering is over. We have miles to go before we sleep. Follow me, the Lord says. When Matthew was called, he describes it simply: “And he rose and followed him” (Matthew 9:9). On March 19th the Lord called Kevin. The result was transcendent and beautiful and comforting. And Kevin rose and followed Him.