

Requiescat in Pace ~ Frederick Ernest Nowak

Isaiah 55:1-11

Philippians 2:1-11

John 3:1-17

Fathers enjoy giving, but it has to be the right gift. Fathers have a protective spirit, a protective nature. Certainly, men are teachers. Character, personal discipline, high ideals – a man of virtue attempts to pass on the inherent value of these traits. A father is overjoyed to see such things in his children, his grandchildren. Fathers also want to be approachable, fun, light-hearted and a catalyst for care-free moments. It's an interesting balance, being serious about serious things and also having an easy laugh, a comedian's timing, not afraid to be goofy, offbeat. I could be wrong, but I don't think that the lasting lessons come through lectures. When children see what their father embodies, *that* is what teaches, *that* is what leaves an impression. We live real, not theoretical, lives. We encounter difficulty, hardship, challenges and how we behave is observed. We either enact the ideals we verbally promote, or we don't. In one way or another, we are all being observed. What are we teaching? What do we embody?

For Fred it was tires. His paternal nature, his protective spirit, decided that tires would be his gift of choice. Perhaps it was because his father worked in a Uniroyal factory. For Fred, the right gift was tires. Love was in tires. Sporting gear, too. The grandkids had to be outfitted with the proper gear and the family had to have proper tires on their cars. Fred's protective spirit was where the rubber hit the road. It was Fred's protective spirit that led him to put on a uniform. The high ideal was patriotism. Love of country, service above self – it was in Fred as conspicuously as his Polish heritage. To become a colonel in the Air Force is no mean feat. One must noticeably distinguish oneself to rise to full-bird colonel. How does one lead? How do the ones being led see their commander? Again, what do we embody? Love of country alone doesn't make one a good leader. What else is imperative to being a leader who leaves a deep impression?

For years, Fred sat in the back of this beautiful church. First, in the back pew of the front part of the church, right on the side aisle, and then, as his mobility deteriorated, in the spot carved out for wheelchairs. Fred was known as the mayor of the rear of the church. Folks would either shake his hand upon entering the church or make their way to him after communion. Fred lived on the street that I live on. The lower part of Campus Ave., that's where Fred, on his porch, would greet, and be greeted by, his neighbors. The military personnel who worked under Fred regularly remarked that they would follow him anywhere. He and Margaret would entertain those military personnel who were in Fred's sphere of influence. They would leave the Nowak home happy, energized, more committed to the job than when they arrived. Again, what did Fred embody, as a man, a leader, a father, a husband, a friend, a grandfather?

Our Father – do you know the prayer? John 3:16 – do you know the verse? Our heavenly Father is a Giver – and He knows how to give. Our Father gives the right gift, the priceless gift, the genuine gift of His loving protection. Even though most, if not all of you, know John 3:16 I reckon that there are some of y'all who misunderstand this verse. That's not because you've heard it wrong or because you've twisted it into something it isn't supposed to be, it's because of the English translation, it's because of how the Greek has been translated into English. Here's

how we've memorized it: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son..." When we hear "God so loved the world" we think in terms of the vastness depth of His love for us. And that's true. We think of God's superlative love, His enormous love. And that's true. But that's not what the words mean. It's the Greek word for "so." This is what it means – God loved the world *in this way*. God's love was demonstrated "in this way" that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. That is the epitome of Fatherly protection – like Fred and his tires. Our Father gave His Son to protect you from death. Jesus, the eternal Son of the eternal Father, was offered as a sacrifice on the Holy Cross to protect you from death – Our Father knows what the right gift is.

Eternal life is the gift and that's what the Father gives. Love prompted the Almighty to send His Son because the threat of death loomed over Frederick Ernest Nowak. Sin brings death. Sin is a calamity, a spiritual and physical calamity. Sin has to be dealt with, definitively. God was not willing that Fred should perish. So, the Father sent His Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem Fred from sin and death. All sin was put on Jesus and He died bearing it, shedding His blood. Christ's blood protected Fred all of His life. Christ's blood is a shield, a fortress, a bastion of grace and Fred lived his life shielded. He knew it. By faith, Fred saw his Lord in action. That translated to a man who gave of himself to others. Fred Nowak came to this place and was fed with the bread of life. He left here happy, knowing that he had been forgiven, energized to be the husband, father, grandfather and neighbor that God designed him to be. Divine love has taken action – 2,000 years ago in the perfect life of the Lord Jesus and in the here and now through the Word and the Sacraments. That love is knowable, it is experienced, it is received and treasured and it refashions us into vessels of mercy and courage and loyalty and icons of grace. That reality animated Fred.

If you were to categorize our Lord's traits – where would you start? Fred was an organizational savant. He would regularly recruit his grandchildren to organize his music, his movies, his coins. Me asking you which of our Lord's many virtues you would list first would tell me something about you. What you treasure in Jesus' life is likely going to be manifested prominently in your own life. So, Fred? What would you say was the thing in our Lord's life that he valued? 10 of us might come up with 10 different answers but this is the one that stood out to me: Margaret said that Fred had a keen interest in taking care of his troops, truly looking out for them, truly putting them above himself, ensuring that they were well cared for, encouraged, given the resources they needed to succeed in their tasks. I'm sure that Fred expected a lot from those who served with him, but they were also rewarded with whatever perquisites he could find. Fred was the colonel, the one in charge, and yet he served those under him. What do you know about Jesus? He said that the greatest should become like the least (Matthew 20:26). He washed His disciples' feet (John 13:1-17). He said that He was among them as one who serves (Luke 22:27), that He did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Christ's life was an honorable life, in the most profound sense. Fred knew it. No one could save Fred from sin and death except the greatest, and on the cross Jesus became the least. It's love, isn't it? We love because Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19). We serve others because Christ first serves us. *That* is how one leads. Fred was a leader because Fred knew who led him. One can be bold *and* humble. Fred learned it from the Gospel, learned it from the Leader of leaders.

Perhaps it is tough to see a colonel as one of Jesus' little lambs. Perhaps it is tough to see a grizzled, salty veteran as one of Jesus' little lambs. Perhaps it is tough to see a John Wayne devotee, a commander of a security division, a man who upon entering a room others would stand and salute as one of Jesus' little lambs, but that is precisely what Fred was, what Fred is. In life, Fred was cared for by the King of kings and the Lord of lords. In life, Fred was cared for by the One who was given the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that He, and He alone, is the Savior, the Protector of the world (Philippians 2:1-11). Fred was content to follow Jesus. In death, Fred followed. Jesus had prepared a place for Fred and on July 25<sup>th</sup> Fred followed in the ultimate sense. Come unto me and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28). And it was so. The risen King claimed Fred as His own and brought him to heaven. All of us still follow the Leader of leaders. He beckons us unto Him, to receive His grace, to hearken to His voice and follow Him (John 10:27-28). And so we shall. We will learn honor and dignity and love and sacrifice and duty and commitment as we follow Christ the King. Fred knows all of that fully now. We are on the way.