

A sermon preached by the Revd RL. Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (8/18), 2019

Jeremiah 23:23-29; Hebrews 11:29-12-2; Luke 12:49-56

I had occasion some time ago to watch a film first released in 1996. It was entitled. "Before and After" and starred Meryl Streep and Liam Neeson. It looked at the journey of a family and examined, with what I thought to be exquisite sensitivity, the reality that, in an instant, life can change for us. We are doing what we always do...just walking along minding our own business...and an event occurs that changes everything forever. From the film's perspective, everything that precedes that instant is "before" and everything that succeeds it is "after."

The family depicted in the film (a mother, father, teenage son, and ten or eleven year-old daughter) is quite clearly, at the outset, a reasonably happy family. They are living quite nicely in a sort of idyllic community and pursuing their particular destinies and loves with a good deal of freedom. Most of humanity would envy them.

In an instant, all this is shattered by the son's lashing out in jealousy at his sweetheart and his misdirected, and utterly unintended, shove sending her to her death in a fall.

The ensuing nightmare for the family pits each member, at one time or another, against the others. Anger, despair, loneliness, fury, and uncertainty all erupt in volcanoes of emotion that threaten to destroy this foursome and send it hurtling into the abyss.

Yet, through it all, there is an undergirding sense that they are each, in his or her own manner, trying to do what is right...what is honorable...what will redeem that which seems unredeemable...what is, in terms we think of; Christian and decent.

The months, indeed years, that follow are a nightmare...lost jobs, the enmity of the community they so love and their eventual departure from it, the son's sentencing to prison, and on and on and on. It is an ordeal none of them asked for, and it began in an instant none of them realized would be the pivot upon which "before" and "after" turned.

Jesus says to his followers, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?" He goes on to enumerate how divisions might occur and between whom...family members included...for those who would engage with him and seek to follow the path he himself will walk...a path of honesty...self-sacrifice...seeking the fulfillment of those with whom he journeys.

It is a harsh illuminating of some of the realities of the Christian journey...its tendency to bring even those dedicated to peaceful solutions into disagreement about how such a journey is lived out...what means will bring the holy and desired end. Jesus removes, quite effectively, any veneer of gentility and ease his hearers might be tempted to put on the journey to which he calls them.

William Stringfellow, a rather insightful Episcopalian, put it quite well when he wrote, "A most obstinate misconception associated with the Gospel of Jesus is that the Gospel is welcome in this world. The conviction...endemic among church folk...persists that, if problems of misapprehension and misinterpretation are overcome and the Gospel can be heard in its own integrity, the Gospel will be found attractive by people, become popular, and even be a success of some sort."(from B Kellerman, *A Keeper of the Word*).

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is equally harsh..."let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

There are things that come in life that we cannot control...things we cannot predict...things that will change everything that comes after...the way we see and understand and know what the world is truly all about.

The cross is the absolute pivot of Jesus of Nazareth's journey...its before and after. He didn't ask for it...he didn't want it, Everything before it could be understood in the manner in which the world wishes to understand...power is the ultimate achievement, material goods are of overwhelming importance, everyone's opinion of one is all-important, comfort and ease and security are what matter, upsetting the status quo is a bad thing, and on and on and on. Everything after it defied such understanding...and a reality never-before seen entered human life.

No dear friends, these moments come regardless of our actions or readiness for their arrival. Even our most fervent attempts to act honorably, decently, lovingly...giving of ourselves for the good of a larger reality...will not make us immune to these times or certain that, during them, we are doing the right thing or able to be in concord with others who are journeying with us and trying their best also to do the right thing.

But what else are we to do? To pull within ourselves...seeking only our own self-preservation, power, and comfort...is to give in to a reality the cross has proved beyond any doubt is bankrupt and utterly destructive to the children of God.

And so it is not really a surprise that the Gospel, rightly understood, can hardly be expected to be "found attractive, become popular, and even be a success of some sort." For it tells us that the only thing over which we have control is the manner in which we will live our lives regardless of what comes into them...and that that manner of life is not necessarily terribly easy.

The Gospel, however, will also offer us hope if we will receive it...a hope lived out in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth...a hope that, in even our darkest hour, there is joy on the other side of the cross attainable only by passing through and not taking a detour around. There is hope and new life possible even when we find ourselves feeling that there is no life in us. There is another side...an after...even to the Cross.

"Before and After" ends with a line I shall bear with me...a line reminding us, as does the Gospel, that these moments that delineate the "befores" and "afters" of our lives come in many varieties...and we are wise, always, to bear that in mind. The years have passed, the son is out of prison, the family is living in a new part of the country, the parents have jobs, and the children are in school. The family is on an outing in a canoe...their faces communicating that they are sadder...but infinitely wiser...regarding the truth of this journey we all make. The daughter's voice is heard as the final scene fades away. She, and her family, have sought, even in the face of great personal loss, to live in those manners I believe each of us, at our baptisms, has promised to live. She and her family have stood at the foot of an unwanted and unasked for Cross and, by their manner of life, passed directly through it to the new reality on its other side. Her words haunt me. "Maybe you cannot keep happiness out of your life forever...anymore than trouble. Your whole life can change in a second, and you never even know when it's coming."