

September 6, 2015

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Parallel Paths: The Good Life - Albert Schweitzer
John 13:34-35

I read a magazine article this week that was written by a man whose wife had a brain aneurysm in 2013. She is alive now, but in this essay, her husband reflected on the scary, chaotic days—many of them—that followed that awful thing that happened in her brain. As a helicopter airlifted her from the tennis court to a hospital, as her family held vigil at her bedside, in the weeks they thought they were going to lose her, as she came slowly back to herself over many months, one thing—one idea, one realization came clearly into this husband’s focus, he said.

“Relinquishment” was the word that came to him. The knowledge that whatever happened to his wife, the internal work he had to do was to be willing to let her go; to hold on a little less tightly. [I realized that] “I was addressing the question of ‘losing Susan’ from the wrong perspective,” he said. “She wasn’t mine to lose. She was never mine to own.” In an unimaginable, crazy, disordered time, when it felt like everything in his life might be falling apart, one thing became clear to him: that he didn’t own this person he loved more than anything; that he held her in trust for God, who had put her—graciously, generously—into his hands for just a while.¹

Stressful, difficult, times can be enormously clarifying. Times of deep grief can feel the same way. There’s a sharpness about them. And if we are paying attention and can calm our frantic minds, often something emerges—a truth, a realization that rises above everything else; the one thing we had to know, the one thing that matters.

In the words we read this morning from the Gospel of John, I think we’re seeing that kind of crystallizing moment in the life of Jesus. We read those words in isolation from their context, so it’s hard to see at first. And we hear them from where we stand now, more than 2,000 years later, so it’s even harder to capture the feel of that moment. But stand back a little and look: This is John’s story of the Last Supper. Jesus and his best friends were sharing their last evening together. Jesus knew that he was one day away from his own death, but no one else in the room had put the pieces together clearly enough to see it. Chaos was about to erupt: soldiers, a trial, a cross. A betrayal by one of his closest friends. This is the kind of drama movies are made from. Jesus must have felt very alone, very sad, maybe very anxious. He had just a tiny bit of time left to create a lasting impression with these friends he loved, these people who had to understand him if anything he had spent his life working for was going to survive.

One thing. Of all the things he’d talked about, tried to teach and show them over three years, one thing rose up in Jesus’ mind that night: one clear, sharp, simple message. And he gave it to them in two ways.

First he took off his outer robe, the piece of clothing that gave him dignity and warmth. He knelt down, so he was underneath them. And then he washed their feet...as if he was their servant, as

¹ Peter Marty, “Holding Each Other Loosely”, *The Christian Century*, September 2, 2015

if he was that person you wouldn't even bother to look at directly because it was just their job to do this kind of messy, meaningless task.

And then he said it to them, with words. "I'm giving you a new commandment," he said. Love one another, just as I have loved you, like I just showed you. This is what it will look like, to follow me. This is how, when other people watch you, they will know that you belong to me."

Here's the thing that captures me about these verses this morning: It's Jesus saying, "Here's a new commandment." What was new? Was this commandment a surprise to his disciples? Hadn't they heard him say already, "Love God; love your neighbor" when someone asked him what the two most important commandments were? What did Jesus think was *new* here?

Maybe what Jesus was saying to those disciples was, "Here's what I see now is the *one thing*. Of all the things I've said to you, all the things that have *seemed* important, here's the one thing I know now that matters more than anything else. If you forget everything else, remember this."

One thing. This is what I know with absolute clarity.

Today is our last day in this series of summer sermons about people who have walked on paths parallel to Jesus, winners of the Nobel Peace Prize. Most of the people we've talked about have received the prize in recent years: Malala Yousafzai, Nelson Mandela, Wangari Maathai, Jimmy Carter, Muhammad Yunus, the Dalai Lama. Today I've chosen someone who is a historical figure, and who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952: Albert Schweitzer.

His name is not unfamiliar, but I wonder if you feel, like I did, that no matter how many times you've heard his name, you're not quite sure what Albert Schweitzer did, or who he was. Here's the short course: Schweitzer was French, born in 1875. He spent most of his adult life and work in Lambarene, in Gabon, a country on the west coast of Africa, south of Sierra Leone.

Schweitzer had an enormous array of talents.

He was a musician, a musical prodigy really. He began to play the organ when he was 8, when his feet could barely reach the pedals. A famous organist was so impressed with Schweitzer's talents as a child that he taught him for no charge. Schweitzer became quite a well-known organist himself, and went on to write the authoritative two-volume study of the compositions of Johan Sebastian Bach.

When he was 18, Schweitzer entered the University of Strasbourg in Austria to study theology, philosophy and musical theory. He completed a PhD and wrote a number of books, including one called "The Quest for the Historical Jesus," that established him as an eminent theologian. I know from my own seminary studies not too long ago that Schweitzer's book began a movement in Christian theology that is still having profound impact.

But even that was not enough for him. Schweitzer went to medical school and became a physician, a surgeon, because what he really felt called to was to be a missionary and serve people in Africa, where there were few trained doctors. He said, "I wanted to be a doctor so

that I could work without having to talk. For years I had been giving myself out in words. This work [wasn't just] talking about the religion of love, [it was actually] putting it into practice." In Lambarene he built a hospital and, eventually, 70 buildings with 350 beds and a place that housed 200 people with leprosy. He actually built the buildings with in his own hands.

While he was in Africa he wrote and published a two-volume book called "The Philosophy of Civilization," his masterwork in ethics.

He lectured all over the world; he received honorary doctorate degrees. Albert Schweitzer was a remarkably accomplished man. He had gifts and talents in many areas that most of us don't have in one. But there was one thing—one big idea—that summed up what was important in Albert Schweitzer's life—in life in general, he thought. He called it "Reverence for Life." It became his philosophy. This reverence for life guided everything he did. He described it very simply: "It is good to maintain and further life; it is bad to damage or destroy life." Every living thing has a desire to live, he believed. And in that common desire, we are brothers and sisters to every living thing, human, animal, plant. We owe to all of them the same care and respect that we wish for ourselves. For him, this was such a profound insight that it rose to the significance of a religion. It *was* his religion.

This was Schweitzer's *one thing*. Of all the things that he could do, had done; of all the things that had brought him fame and satisfaction and recognition, here was the one thing that mattered most to him, that distilled every other piece of work and goal to its most essential purpose: a reverence for life. *All* life.

Do you remember that story from the Gospel when Jesus is at the home two sisters for dinner and they have a fight? Martha is running around getting dinner ready, taking care of all the details, making sure everything is just right; and her sister Mary is distracted by listening to Jesus talk. She just sits at his feet and listens to him, forgets completely about helping her sister. At the moment she's most flustered and frustrated, Martha complains to Jesus. Geez, she says, look at this! There are a million things to do here, and my sister's not helping at all! And how does Jesus answer her? Here's how it looks to me, Martha, he says; you're worried about so many things. You're distracted and pulled in many directions. You've lost sight of what really matters: just one thing. One thing.

Is there one thing that makes sense of your life? Something that guides your thinking and your actions? Some piece of wisdom that focuses your attention when life gets chaotic and you get pulled in many different directions? Is there one idea that captures your best hope for yourself? A word that calls you back to what's most important?

One thing. Just one thing.