

Ten Thousand Charms

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John 12:20-33

Recently, a member of our church told a remarkable story of forgiveness that unfolded at a Macon area prison. The story begins with a brother and sister whose mother was killed in a robbery gone awry. As a result of that tragic event, the family lost another brother and sister to suicide and committed a third sister to a mental institution. In time, the remaining brother and sister each divorced their spouses and each developed debilitating health problems. If anyone knows the true cost of crime, these two do.

But in time, they found their quest for vengeance was killing them. So out of self-preservation as well as Christian duty, this brother and sister found it within themselves to forgive their mother's killer, and not just in spirit, but in person. Standing before a room full of lifers, they embraced the man who killed their mother. This convict had spent most of his life behind bars, from age sixteen to his present age of forty-something. But this brother and sister not only forgave him; they vowed to help him start his life over again.

Present as a guest, our fellow church member was asked to make a few remarks. She made her way forward, searching for words to describe the miracle everyone had just witnessed. Here I'll let her take up the tale.

Shocked because I had not prepared anything in advance, I walked toward the microphone having no idea what I could say . . . I looked out at that mass of men, most of whom were in prison for murder, and claimed with them the witness to the miracle of redemption, forgiveness, and grace, which was ours if we would arise and go to Jesus, for he would embrace us in his arms. 'In the arms of our dear Savior, oh, there are ten thousand charms.'

Perhaps the greatest miracle of all was yet to be. After these hardened criminals witnessed this miracle of forgiveness, and after hearing our sister bear her testimony, about 60 men lined up to speak with her. One by one, in bewilderment and pain and longing, they asked to know more about Jesus and his "ten thousand charms."

The phrase, "Ten Thousand Charms," is from our offertory hymn for the morning:

Come ye sinners, poor and needy weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you, full of pity, love, and power.

I will arise and go to Jesus, he will embrace me in his arms;
In the arms of my dear Savior oh, there are ten thousand charms

If you find the notion of criminals being drawn to Jesus scandalous or suspicious, then please take it up with him. It is he who promised, "And when I am lifted up, I will draw *all* people to myself" (John 12:32).

That promise is sounded in today's Gospel lesson. The story begins with some Greeks in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Passover. The town is abuzz with talk of Jesus. News of his raising of Lazarus has convinced many he is God's messiah. Huge, adoring crowds have welcomed Jesus, wildly waving their palms, as he enters the city riding on a donkey. Now these Greeks--vagabonds from the wider world Jesus came to reach--seek an audience with him. They want to know more about this one who forgives the most wretched of sinners, while opening the eyes of the blind and the tombs of the dead. "Sir," the Greek visitors tell Philip, "we wish to see Jesus" (v. 21).

Philip seeks out Andrew for a consult. Neither is quite sure what to do with this new development. Greeks don't belong to the people of God. Philip and Andrew aren't sure the party of God's grace breaking out in Jesus is meant for the likes of them. Finally, the two disciples screw up their courage and take the matter to Jesus. "Lord," they tell him, "some Greeks are here who want to see you."

Jesus nods gravely and says, "The hour has come for the son of man to be *glorified*."

"Glory" is a word we have heard often in this gospel. We have seen God's glory revealed in the beauty of Jesus' life (1:14); we have seen God's glory revealed in the power of Jesus' deeds (2:11). But here in chapter 12, Jesus points to a different kind of glory: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." To which John adds the ominous footnote, "Now he said this to indicate the kind of *death* he was to die" (v. 33).

There are few sights more beautiful than Macon in the spring. The glory of the Bradford pears, bursting into a rich spray of blossoms; the glory of the cherry trees, creating for one brief week, a splendid canopy of grace; the glory of violets and lilies, waking up the drab, brown earth with a vivid splash of color. But the glory of the spring is only possible because of the cold, barren winter that was before when in the hiddenness of the earth, the wonder of new life stirred, took root, and sprouted.

The same is true for Jesus: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies," he tells us, "it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Truth be told, the glory of Jesus' life and the glory of Jesus' deeds, did not change the world;

it took the crucifixion to do that as from the dead wood of the cross, God called forth a new beginning for the world.

Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship visited a prison in Brazil based on Christian principles. Colson found a clean, well-run prison where the inmates were kind and considerate. Bible verses were written on every wall. An inmate led Colson to view solitary confinement where on the wall was a beautiful crucifix with Jesus hanging on it. Head down, eyes lowered, the prisoner at Colson's elbow whispered softly, "He's doing time for the rest of us." And once more, Jesus' promise sounds, "And when I am lifted up, I will draw *all* people to myself."

Why does Jesus' cross so profoundly multiply the power of his life? First, because the cross is such a devastating judgement: "Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out" (v. 31). Never forget Jesus was crucified by the best religion and government of his day. Blaise Pascal rightly observed, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

But the cross not only unmask how corrupt even the best religion and government can be; the cross reveals how corrupt each of *us* can be. The shocking scandal that brought down Governor Spitzer this week is a sober reminder of Jesus' truth: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?" (Matthew 7:4). According to Jesus, we viciously attack in others evil left unacknowledged in ourselves.

In his terrifying and poignant novel, *Sophie's Choice*, William Styron writes about the people who staffed Hitler's concentration camps. We want to believe they were savage barbarians, evil Nazis perpetrating crimes of which we ourselves are incapable. The terrible truth is the holocaust was unleashed by persons just like us, who loved their families, minded their manners, listened to Mozart, and went to church. Styron writes,

The rolls of the SS at Auschwitz contained almost no professional soldiers but were instead composed of a cross section of German society. They included waiters, bakers, carpenters, restaurant owners, physicians, a bookkeeper, a post office clerk, a waitress, a bank clerk, a nurse, a locksmith, a fireman, a customs officer, a legal advisor, . . . the list goes on and on with these commonplace and familiar citizen's pursuits. There needs only to be added the observation that history's greatest liquidator of Jews, the thick-witted Heinrich Himmler, was chicken farmer.

No, Jesus won't let us get away with believing we are better than other folk, somehow more righteous and deserving. The Holy Spirit takes the verdict of the cross and presses it home in our hearts (John 16:8). That's when we discover that for all our moral and spiritual finery, we are but a freshly painted house with termites: we're rotting

from the inside out. “For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander,” says Jesus. “*These* are what defile a person” (Matthew 15:19-20).

I still remember when the Holy Spirit first turned the searchlight of God’s truth on me. To be sure, as a boy of 9 or 10, I wasn’t a great sinner, as the world measures such things. But it was a terrible day when in my heart of hearts I discovered, Jesus didn’t just die for the sins of the world; Jesus died for *me*.

But thank God, the cross is not just a judgement. If the cross were just a judgement, it would destroy us. “But God sent not his Son to condemn the world but that the world might have life through him” (John 3:17). This is the great paradox at the heart of the gospel. On the one hand, Jesus’ cross brings the most devastating of judgements; but on the other, Jesus’ cross shatters that judgement with an unspeakable grace. “Now is the judgment of this world,” says Jesus. “Now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” But immediately after the bad news of judgement sounds the good news of grace. “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw *all* people to myself.”

There are two beams on the cross and two movements in the symphony of God’s “Amazing Grace.” The horizontal beam of the cross represents the sin of the world; the horizontal beam represents our sins, unmasked and exposed. That is a painful judgement, and one every person who would come to Christ in hope and longing, must endure.

But the shattering power of the cross rests not only in its horizontal beam, but in the vertical beam when the world’s sin and need--when *my* sin and need--is met not by a punishing judgement, but an atoning love as Jesus, the holy Son of God, takes our sin unto himself, absorbs our evil without returning our evil, and dies at the intersection of the world’s crying need and God’s desperate love. Thus, at his cross as nowhere else, Jesus becomes the light shining in the darkness that no darkness, no matter how deep or desperate, can ever extinguish (John 1:5).

Velma Barfield was the first woman to be executed in the United States in 22 years. She was North Carolina’s version of Macon’s own Anjette Lyles, poisoning and killing those closest to her. Due to a sick, twisted mind, Ms. Barfield’s crimes were heinous and most folks believed she deserved to die.

But that is not the end of the story. While in prison, Velma met Jesus Christ. And this was no jailhouse conversion, lasting just as long as the appeals process. According to insiders, this woman's life was completely transformed. Once a cold-blooded murderess, she became a person of sensitivity and grace.

Indeed, once untroubled by her crimes, Velma came to feel great anguish over them. She was tormented by the realization of what she had done. As her execution drew near, she even came to wonder if her Savior could forgive sins so grave as hers.

It was then that Velma's friend, Ann Lutz, offered her these words of comfort. "Velma, have you ever been to the beach and seen the tiny crab holes?" Velma answered that she had.

"And have you ever seen the huge holes dug by a child building a sand castle?" Yes, Velma had seen those also.

"What happens when the tide comes in?" asked Ann.

"It covers them all."

"That's right," Ann continued. "It covers them all. And that is the Bible's promise to you: `The blood of Jesus cleanses from *all* sin'" (1 John 1:7).

"And when I am lifted up," Jesus promised, "I will draw *all* people to myself." That means even Velma Barfield and that means even me and even you.

For at the cross, God meets our sin with a lavish and scandalous grace. Now all who turn to Christ in faith and repentance can know life abundant and life eternal, so hear and believe the good news:

Come ye sinners, poor and needy weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you full of pity, love, and power.

I will arise and go to Jesus, he will embrace me in his arms;
in the arms of my dear savior, Oh, there are ten thousand charms

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