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Together With Christ

Ephesians 2:4-5

A recent episode of “This American Life” told an unusual story about a family which was put in crisis by the Madoff ponzi scheme. A young man learned from his friends in the early 1990s how they were making consistent returns of 15-20% on their investments. After consulting his wife they, too, invested everything they had with Madoff. But when his wife’s father learned what they were doing, he told them something they did not want to hear. He told them that it was not wise to put all their money in the same place. He said that no matter how phenomenal Madoff’s results may be they should not give him all of their savings to invest.

This advice created a crisis for the couple. They could not agree on what to do. The husband wanted to stay with Madoff and the wife believed her father was right. The young man eventually concluded that the only way he could save his marriage was to pull all his money out of Madoff’s fund and invest it somewhere else. For sixteen years he watched his friends benefiting from Madoff’s incredible performance while he grieved over being part of a family that could not participate in this fabulous opportunity. For sixteen years he was so angry with his father-in-law he could not look him in the eye. While his father-in-law understood this anger his integrity would not permit him to back away from the sound advice he had given. When Madoff’s fraud was exposed, this family was transformed. The young man saw his friends lose everything and he realized how close he came to experiencing the same degree of ruin. He knew that he had been saved because he was part of a family that had learned to see beyond short term gain. This was a family that was not blinded by their greed. He thanked his father-in-law for telling him what he did not want to hear.

We see a similar crisis playing out in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler of the Jews, comes to Jesus by night. Nicodemus was an established and successful man. He was at the height of his power and very much in control. The fact that he comes to Jesus shows that he is looking for something more, but he is not sure what it is. All he knows is that his success and material possessions are not enough to feed his soul.

As Nicodemus approaches Jesus he demonstrates his desire to be in control of the situation. It is not by accident that he comes at night. He has a reputation to protect. He doesn’t want his relationship with this controversial rabbi to become part of the public record. When he meets with Jesus he is careful to maintain the upper hand. He is the one who asks the questions. His questions are probing and difficult.

But Jesus gives him an answer that he does not want to hear. Jesus tells him that the only way that his soul can be fed is for him to relinquish control and experience the radical transformation of his heart. Once again Nicodemus becomes the questioner who tries to keep the other person on the defensive. “How can these things be (John 3:9)?” Jesus is inviting him to a journey that is not about his own personal gain. On this journey the needs of others come first. That is a journey Nicodemus is not prepared to make. He is not ready for that kind of transformation.

The 1956 film *The African Queen* tells the story of two people on a journey in which their hearts are transformed. Katharine Hepburn plays a woman named Rose Sayer who has gone to Africa as a missionary because she could not attract a husband back home in England. Humphrey Bogart plays Charles Allnut who runs a river delivery boat called “The African Queen” while wasting his life on alcohol. These two people are thrown together by events they cannot control. The outbreak of World War I causes the failure of Charlie’s business and the sudden end of Rosie’s missionary activities. They make an improbable journey down the river during which they fall in love and overcome obstacles they never thought they could handle. The nature of their transformation becomes clear when they are captured by the Germans and condemned to be hanged as spies. The German officer reluctantly agrees to their outlandish request to be married just before their execution. In the joy of that moment they understand that for them death is not what is waiting for them at the end of the rope. Death is the emptiness they experienced before their journey together. They have already made the journey from death to life.

The journey with Jesus is described in these terms in Ephesians 2. This passage was used as a baptism liturgy in the early church. Baptism means leaving behind a life that is defined by our self-serving goals and taking on a new life where Jesus Christ is at the center. In Ephesians we read:

But God...out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...(Ephesians 2:4-5).

Baptism signifies our death to an old life of self seeking and our birth to a new life as the instruments of Christ’s love.

Teaching people the meaning of their baptism was at the heart of the ministry of John Calvin. John T. McNeill has described Calvin’s place in history in these words:

In the year 1551, the canons of the cathedral of Noyon in Picardy celebrated in solemn procession the death of that city's most eminent son, John Calvin the Reformer. An illness of Calvin, unverified rumor, and wishful thinking had induced this celebration, which was premature by thirteen years. A year later, when Noyon suffered a disastrous fire, Calvin expressed his sorrow for the ruined city, but remarked: 'I survive my birthplace that last year gave solemn thanks for my supposed death.' When he died in Geneva in 1564, an eyewitness wrote that his corpse was 'followed by almost the whole city, not without many tears.' In these incidents lies a kind of allegory of Calvin's fate in history. He has been execrated and defamed, admired and extolled. His influence has sometimes been jubilantly reported to have expired; but it has survived the authors of the reports. He remains so famous that, as is wont to happen with the great, persons ignorant of his life and work pronounce judgment upon him with the utmost finality. But he will not be thus easily dismissed (John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, page 93).

Calvin’s willingness to tell people what they did not want to hear meant that there were many who wanted to dismiss him. But the throngs that followed his casket through the streets of Geneva knew something his detractors did not. The people who were around Calvin had already joined him on the journey which leads from death to life. That is the journey into which you and I have been baptized.