

Sermon for February 14, 2018

Ash Wednesday

"One Act"

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Today I want to share with you a short story called "One Act."

One Act:

"Mom there's one thing I don't understand." Her green eyes flashed and the dimple on the right cheek quivered the way it always did when she was pondering another of the life questions that other girls her age rarely contemplated. "Must you have the answer before you get to school," her mother replied as she fastened her seat belt, "we need to get to school before your class leaves for the park today." "The Sunday School teacher said," the little voice persisted in asking, "that a person can live a bad life and go to heaven because she turns to God at the end. Is that true?" Her mother was no theologian but she answered, "I don't understand how one act can change a whole life, but I guess it's true."

He was awakened by the wind from the passing minivan. Mark looked around. Okay, he had slept on the bus stop bench again. He looked for the street names: 34th and West. Now that he knew where he was what time was it? Mark looked at his watch. It was nothing fancy, but he had found it in the garbage. Someone had thrown it out with a brand new battery in it. All it had needed was to have its contacts cleaned. It told the time and date. It also glowed in the dark, which was nice. Mark had rescued it from the dump. He admired his prized possession as he looked for the time: 8:15. Mark had 15 minutes to get to the mission three blocks away if he wanted to get breakfast.

"... Your life is worth nothin' without Jeesuss," the preacher shouted as he pounded the makeshift podium that masqueraded as a pulpit. Mark could stomach the oatmeal and dry toast, but the preaching left something to be desired. Yet, the preacher's words made him think. What was his life worth? Here he was almost 60 and his prized possession was a \$20 watch discarded by someone else. No family, no career. His only accomplishment was a firsthand knowledge of all the missions and handouts in town.

As Mark cleaned out the crumbs from the bottom of his bowl he thought about his itinerary for the day. Today he had to go to the free clinic. His health was bad but once it had been good, back in the good old days when he was a strong swimmer.

"Come on! You can make it. You can't expect to be a life saver if you swim like that." Mark's young face looked up from the water, "I took a whole 10 seconds off my time from last week." The coach glared back in disbelief; "You're still too slow! You're never gonna amount to anything are you Markus?" Mark jumped out of the water; "Start the watch again." The coach barely had time to clear it before Mark dove back into the water and attacked every stroke like it was his last. He found the water like a wounded animal. Wounded by the words "You'll never amount to anything." It stuck like a barb in his side. Breathe 2, 3, 4 breathe 2, 3, 4. He hit the side and looked up at the coach. "How'd I do?" "Like I said, you'll never amount to anything Markus."

Mark looked down. His oatmeal was cold. "You'll never amount to anything Markus." The words still hurt just as it had that day decades ago. He didn't remember the meets or the medals or even the time he did make lifeguard, just the words. He had better get to the clinic before the line gets too long.

Cardiac something; what was it the doctor said? Anyway, it meant his heart. Something might be wrong with his heart. At his age what else could it be? Mark thought about the examination and the talk of future appointments. The leaves in the park were turning. It was fall in the park and it was the fall of his life. And what had he done. Nothing, nothing, and nothing; the words came back to him as a thousand times before like cold of water when you first jump in, "You'll never amount to anything Markus."

Mark's thoughts were halted by the sound of children screaming. He had noticed the class from the neighborhood school before but now the tone of their screams suddenly changed. A small child was thrashing about in the water in the middle of the pond under the footbridge as other children pointed and screamed. At that moment something that had been burned into Mark's subconscious came to life. Without thinking, he shed his coat and ran for the water. At the edge his shoes left him. Ancient training seared into his nervous system and dormant for years sprang to life. He swam like he was 17 again. He could hear the voice. "Come on Marcus you never be a life saver if you can't swim faster." When he got to the bridge the girl had gone under. Mark dove and dove again finally after what seemed like an eternity under the dark waves of the pond he came up. She was small but she was all dead weight. With one arm he held her and with the other he swam and swam the shore seemed a mile away but he swam. At the shore he pulled her up on the beach. She wasn't breathing! Her dark green eyes still open glared blankly heavenward. All that and she was dead. A sharp pain hit Mark's shoulder. Then he remembered. "Turn the head and clear the mouth. Tilt the neck to open the pathway. In small children cover the mouth and nose and blow until the chest rises. Allow enough time for the chest to fall then blow again. After five blows check the pulse," she had a pulse but no breath. Again he blew and again and again. The pain hit his shoulder again. He could feel his heart pounding. "Breathe 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe 2, 3, 4, 5," he said to himself as he strove to bring breath back to her body. Finally she gagged and coughed and breathed. Mark hadn't noticed but a group of people had gathered. They all cheered. The ambulance arrived and the EMS technicians took over.

Mark sat down on a nearby bench. As people patted his back and the EMS men checked out the girl. One turned to Mark. "You're a life saver all right. How long was she out?" "Oh, it seemed like forever, but I guess it was a minute or two." The pain in his shoulder got sharper and Mark flinched. "Sir, are you all right?" the technician asked. "Yeah, why?" "You look pale." The technician grabbed Mark's arm and took his pulse. Then he turned to the other technician. "Tom, call in another unit now! We have another situation." Then he turned back to Mark. "When did the pain in your shoulder start." At that Mark collapsed. They did CPR. They defibrillated him. But that was that.

The wind from the passing transport blew the falling leaves around and an old woman polished the brass plate on the statue. Her thoughts were interrupted by a small voice. "Mark-us S-m-i-th. Who was he?" The old woman's green eyes flashed and the remnant of a dimple on her cheek jumped as she smiled. "He's a hero," she said in a rough voice. "Was he a general or an astronaut or somethin'" the small voice queried. "No he was a homeless man." "Then what'd he do?" "He saved a life." "That's all! And they built this statue of him? He didn't cure cancer or discover a new world?" "No, he did nothing, but save one life: my life." The old woman looked into the little boy's eyes. "Always remember and don't ever forget son: one act can change a person. One act, one good courageous act changed him from a bum to a hero." "I don't think I understand" the little inquisitor replied. "That's O.K. It took me a long time to understand too. When I was your age I couldn't understand how just one choice, one act, can change who a person is. But I believe it now."

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, to be reconciled to God." Paul was calling the Corinthians to repentance. It was a small thing to say, "I leave the old and turn to God." But by that one small action we open ourselves up to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

In the story "One Act" Mark was someone who had done nothing his whole life but one act changed who he was. That act was a metaphor for the act of repentance: turning to God. It was one thing, but it was not easy yet that one act changed Mark.

Turn to God! Paul said "now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation." Some may think this message out of place. After all most people who would take the time to attend an Ash Wednesday service are already dedicated Christians. But there is always room for growth. And one act of repentance can open your heart up to the sanctifying grace of God.