

# Perpetual Feast

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In his masterful biography of Harry Truman, David McCullough relays the story of an episode that took place years after the end of Truman's presidency when he and his wife Bess were back in Independence, Missouri. It was a story recounted by the local Presbyterian pastor, Thomas Melton. Rev. Melton told of a cold February day in Independence, wind blowing, snow falling, and he had been given the task of burying a former resident of Independence who had moved away (no doubt to Florida!) and died. The body had been shipped north, a notice had been placed in the paper and as sometimes happens when the pastor and the funeral director arrived at the graveside nobody was there. No one around to pay last respects. Since there had been a notice in the paper the pastor insisted on waiting until the appointed hour. Just before they were set to begin, amidst the wind and cold and snow, they noticed a car pull into the cemetery and drive up the hill. They waited. The car came to a stop at the graveside and out stepped Harry Truman, 33<sup>rd</sup> President of the United States. Truman stood at the graveside while, in the biting Missouri cold, the pastor performed the committal service. After the service was over Rev. Melton went to the former President and said, "Mr. President, why are you here? It's cold and bitter. Did you know this gentleman?" To which Truman replied, "Pastor, I never forget a friend."

Pastor, I never forget a friend. No one will ever know who that friend was – or what it was that made him a friend, but there are things that occur in a relationship that last forever. And Truman, by God's grace, had been given the chance to remember.

Tucked away in the recesses of the Old Testament is a story they never taught me in Sunday School. A story almost lost inside the grand narrative of Biblical history. It's a story about Saul, the first king of Israel. Saul is a tragic figure who manages to make all the wrong decisions and soon falls out of favor with Samuel, the great judge of Israel. Even God appears to withhold his favor from him. Saul dies a tragic death on the fields of battle by falling on his own sword so as to avoid being captured by the Philistines. The Philistines, in their vengeance, desecrate the body of Saul and in humiliating fashion nail it to the wall in the middle of one of their towns – Beth-shan. An ignominious demise. Frankly, all of Israel is somewhat relieved that the king is gone. But several miles away there is an Israelite town – Jabesh-gilead – that remembers something about the King. And what they remember is that when Saul was at the very beginning of his kingship he had come to their aid. They had been surrounded by the Philistines and were awaiting a most certain demise. And when Saul the new king had become aware of their plight – he enlisted the men of Israel to join him in coming to their aid. And they did. They rescued the people of Jabesh-gilead. So when word came to that little town that the tragic king had died his tragic death and was left to such tragic display – the people of Jabesh-gilead remembered. There are some things that last forever. They remembered the mercy of Saul, they remembered the rescue of Saul and scripture tells us this: “When the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead heard what the Philistines had done to Saul, all the valiant men set out, traveled all night long, and took the body of Saul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Beth-shan. They came to Jabesh and burned them there. Then they took their bones and buried them under the tamarisk tree in Jabesh, and fasted seven days.”

*There are some things never to be forgotten.*

Literature and history is filled with stories about the bad things people don't forget. Feuds that last generations and centuries. Hatfield's and McCoy's. Montague's and Capulet's. Irish and the British. Christians, Muslims and Jews. Republicans and Democrats. You don't have to look long or far to find the bad things that people don't forget. And what history would want to tell us is that it's

these bad things, these grievances, these transgressions, these bones to pick – that these are the things that last forever. That we are doomed to such ignominious destiny.

But for the people of Jabesh-gilead there was a tamarisk tree that reminded them of something different – Blessed are the merciful, for they shall someday receive mercy. Mercy never goes away. Mercy lasts forever. There's were not bones to pick, there's were bones to bury. Properly. And with a fast that lasted seven days.

*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.*

So Peter approaches Jesus and wonders with him about how long does he have to wait before he begins making people pay for their bad things. What is the statute of limitations when it comes to mercy, Jesus? How many times do I have to forgive, Jesus? And then he throws out a crazy number – seven times. Seven times do I have to turn the other cheek? But then Jesus throws out an even crazier number – how about seven times seventy?

And from there Jesus tells the story about a guy who has a person in his life who is in debt to him up to his eyeballs. He's got this guy in his life who has taken advantage of him, treated him like a chump, who has taken him for granted, who has taken him for just about everything he's got. And so he says to himself, "OK, now it's time to pay up." And he goes to the guy and says, "That's it. Time to pay up" And so the guy begs for mercy. Now this is not the first time this guy has begged for mercy. You don't get in debt up to your eyeballs without begging for mercy along the way. So here he is again begging for mercy. And so this guy is saying to himself, No, enough is enough. You pay the rest of your life for what you have done to me. The statute of limitations is over. But then for whatever reason he opts for mercy. He gives in again. And he doesn't just give in, he clears the decks. Free and clear. You don't owe me a dime. Now here is the deal – when he does this he takes a huge risk. Because he doesn't know if it's going to make a difference. It may not change the guy. But he does it anyway. Cancels the I.O.U. for a bazillion dollars. And he may never see the fruit of it. And yet, what he is willing to believe is that the mercy is enough. The mercy is enough. The mercy on its own

is enough, regardless of whether it's understood or remembered. Someday, somehow the merciful receive mercy. Kind of like Lucy holding the football for Charlie Brown so he can kick it. And she keeps pulling it away – and he keeps trying and he keeps giving her another chance.

And so sure enough the guy doesn't get it. He doesn't understand. The mercy just rolls off his back. And he runs into a guy who owes him a box of paperclips and he says, "I can't let those paperclips go. I know it's just a box of paperclips – but it's the principle of the matter. I feel like you got one over on me. So I guess I need to teach you a lesson. And it would appear that mercy has disappeared.

But mercy doesn't disappear. Mercy is spiritual mass. Physicists will tell you that mass doesn't go away. It cannot disappear. It can take on different forms, but it cannot go away. Mercy, Jesus says, doesn't go away. It may get lost on people, but it does not go away. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall someday receive mercy.

That's what those warriors from Jabesh-gilead were saying. Mercy doesn't go away. It will appear somehow someday. And though we may risk our lives in climbing the walls of the Philistines and taking their desecrated spoils away. Though it may seemingly make no difference that we give the king his proper burial. Though it may seem a small thing that we lay his bones underneath that tamarisk tree – and fast our seven days. There is something about mercy, we have to believe, that lasts forever.

Maybe that's why they called it a tree that they strapped and nailed Jesus' body to. It wasn't a tree, but they called it a tree. God incarnate taking away the sin of the world. The desecrated lamb of God. God taking this huge risk that we may not get it. This beautiful act of mercy might just get lost on us. We might turn away and relish in our grievances and pick bones and hold grudges and stop speaking to others. Perfect love and mercy on the tree and we might just say, "Whatever." But God knows, mercy doesn't go away, just because we don't recognize it, or understand it, or appreciate it. Mercy is forever. It will come back to us ... someday, someday. It will come back to

us. Seven times. Seventy-seven times. Seventy times seven times. It will come back to us. Blessed are those who are merciful, for they will receive mercy.

As we do today. At the table. The perpetual feast. Gathered are we from east and west and north and south. The world invited to this table. We take our seat underneath the tree and remember that it's still here. It hasn't gone away. Though it be centuries. Though it be continents away. Though it be seemingly lost on us. Mercy knows. Mercy knows. "Father, forgive them, here at this tree, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Because there are things that occur in a relationship that last forever. And by God's grace, we have been given the chance again to remember.