

Whatever

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Galatians 2:15-21

In J.R.R. Tolkien's masterpiece, *Lord of the Rings*, he tells the story of a world called Middle Earth. In many respects Middle Earth is a rather charming world with lush landscapes and cute little hobbits bandying about. But there is at the same time in Middle Earth a growing and menacing evil. All is not well. A dark force is at work and something must be done about it. As it turns out the sum of this evil force is localized in a ring that falls into the possession of a hobbit named Frodo. And with this ring comes a mission – and the mission is to destroy the ring. But the only way to destroy the ring such that is really is destroyed is that it must be taken into the heart of evil itself – the epicenter of the dark force -- the summit of Mount Doom – and there it must be cast into the volcanic crater to be destroyed. The mission to save the world has fallen into the hands of this little hobbit Frodo and his hobbit companion Sam Gamgee. The three volumes of Tolkien's classic follow the hobbit and his friend as they somewhat reluctantly take up and pursue their mission to save the world. It is a mission fraught with peril. Every step it seems has the potential of being a misstep – but the two little hobbits continue armed with nothing but the call to save the world. As they draw close to the epicenter of evil, the top of Mount Doom, the evil forces grow in their intensity, threaten to crush them, and fill them with every reason not to go on. They doubt themselves and wonder if they are up to the task. Perhaps they should turn around and go home. And now it's the night before they summit the mountain. The two hobbits, Sam and Frodo, are lying in hiding not sure of what the next day will bring. And then Tolkien writes these words:

“(Sam) sat down beside (his master) Frodo. No more debates disturbed his mind. He knew all the arguments of despair and would not listen to them. His will was set, and only death would break it. He felt no longer either desire or need of sleep, but rather of watchfulness. He knew that all the hazards and perils were now drawing together to a point: the next day would be a day of doom, the day of final effort or disaster, the last gasp. At last he groped for Frodo's hand. It was cold and trembling. His master was shivering.”

It is no surprise to know that those words were written by a veteran of World War I. J.R.R. Tolkien had as a young man burrowed trenches on the front lines of France to repel the advance of the German/Austrian/Ottoman armies. Later Tolkien became a professor at Oxford and found himself teaching young men who themselves were being sent off to the next World War to repel the advances of the menacing forces of Hitler. For Tolkien the stakes always appeared high. The mission to save the world was always before you.

Now as it turns out this mission to save the world seems to find its way into the hands of people who are not up to the task. In fact, the mission to save the world always finds its way into the hands of people who are not up to the task. The ring falls into the hands of a hobbit. The fate of World Wars fall into the hands of 18 year old Privates First Class. The delivery of the Israelites from Egypt falls into the hands of a cowardly stutterer, Moses. The kingdom of Israel falls into the hands of teenage shepherd boy. The delivery of the Messiah falls into the womb of a Jewish peasant girl. The building of the new community of the Church is placed upon the foundation of a man who cut and run and denied ever knowing Jesus. The mission to the Gentiles falls into the hands of the least qualified of apostles. The mission to save the Union falls into the hands of a backwoods Illinois lawyer. If there is anything that history teaches us and that the Bible teaches us is that the world is saved by people like us. And not just people like us, but people who are us. The heroes of today are the people sitting in these pews. The ring falls into our hands.

Now this timeless, historic and Biblical lesson often gets lost on us – because we think that the world-saving stories are only the stories that end up in the history books. And we imagine that there is little chance that we will have to climb ourselves Mount Doom, or that we will have to dig a trench on the front lines of a war, or that we will be elected President, or that we will have to confront Pharaoh. No, we say, the folks who save the world are the people who are on the front page of the paper or in the thin pages of the Bible, or in the glossy pages of the textbook. And that somehow the rest of us get a pass – and we get to mosey along and we get to shrug our shoulders and we get to shake our heads, we get to watch our cable news and we get to say “Whatever”.

Whatever. What a wonderful word. Whatever. Edmund Burke said once, “That the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” I'd like to revise that to say, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men and women to say, ‘Whatever’.”

“Whatever” is such an easy word to say? Right? Read today's headlines, Whatever. See the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Whatever. See talking heads shout at each other. Whatever. See your parents get a divorce. Whatever. See drug addiction on the rise. Whatever. See your best friend turn his back on you. Whatever.

Whatever is the word of disengagement. It is the word of indifference. It is the word that says, “Who cares?” It is the word that says, “Not me.” It is the word that

says, “Not worth it.”

Whatever. The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men and women to say, Whatever.

The Galatians – this community of Celtic Christians to whom Paul was writing – were a community who were on the edge of whatever. And their whatever had to do with what they were believing. What was necessary to believe about the gospel. Some believed one way, some believed another way. Some said there were requirements for admission (like circumcision that Laurie reluctantly talked about last week) – some thought that there weren't any requirements. And pretty soon they were saying, “Whatever.” It doesn't matter. I don't care.

But Paul wasn't a whatever kind of guy. The world doesn't get saved with whatever. For Paul the gospel had everything to do with the gracious presence and power of Jesus Christ in our lives. The gospel wasn't a proposition, the gospel was a person – a crucified and resurrected person who was alive and lives inside of us. You can sit there and argue theology all you want – you can bicker about Bible verses until you are blue in the face -- but what it boils down to, Paul says – the gospel is the living reality of Jesus inside us.

It is no longer I who live, Paul says, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and who gave himself for me.

You cannot be a whatever person and say what I just said. It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son

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It explains, doesn't it, the life of the apostle Paul, this misguided murdering zealot who once thought it was his mission to persecute the early church – but then something happened. Something happened. And it wasn't a proposition, it wasn't a political pithy pronouncement, it wasn't some rule or regulation – something happened. Actually, someone happened. And Paul looked inside and found there the risen Christ – and he realized that it wasn't he who was living ... it was Christ living in him. And when Christ is living in you – then you are on a mission to be Christ in the world. And when Christ is in the world the world changes. It gets better. It gets truer. It gets more beautiful. And we become heroes – because day by day, moment by moment, we are changing the world with the sure and certain presence of Jesus.

Charles Sheldon wondered about that when he wrote his classic story entitled "In His Steps." It's a story about a community of people in some Midwestern town who started asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" They didn't wear it on their wrists – they asked it in their hearts because what they knew was inside, was the living presence of Christ. It was the only question they could think to ask. The banker asked it. The newspaper editor asked it. The pastor asked it. The mayor asked it. And they found that when they started asking that question their town started to change. The newspaper got truer. The bank got cleaner. The church got more loving. They were saving the world – but it wasn't they who were saving the world it was Christ saving the world through them. They didn't ascend Mount Doom. They didn't dig a trench on the front lines of France. They didn't abolish slavery. But each and every day they started with the question, What would Jesus do? Not the Jesus out there somewhere, not the Jesus trapped inside the Bible, not the Jesus that the preacher blah, blah, blahs about. But the Jesus who is already inside of you. The you that goes to Starbucks or works a summer job or attends Freshman orientation or hits a double in the gap, or plans for retirement or lands a nine iron onto the green or has friends over for drinks or takes the

grandchildren to Disney World. Christ is inside each one of us – and the sooner we grasp that the sooner we start living like heroes.

So I wrote a play once. Yes, I am a playwright. Shakespeare has nothing on me. And the play I wrote is entitled, "Forty-five Seconds". And it is a play based upon a man named Cleveland Stroud. He's a real guy. He's a basketball coach. A pretty good basketball coach. Good enough to lead his high school basketball team – the Rockdale County High Bulldogs – to the Georgia State Championship. And they won! A historic moment in the history of a high school and a high school player. Cleveland Stroud became quite a hero. But he became even more of a hero when a couple weeks after winning the Georgia State Basketball Championship it was discovered that one of his bench players, a kid who was on the team more for practice than for playing, who Cleveland Stroud put into the end of a game – a game in which the Bulldogs were ahead by 23 points – put in for the last 45 seconds of that game – this young man to nobody's notice was actually academically ineligible. Not by much. Just a little. 45 seconds. And when Cleveland Stroud noticed that this infraction had occurred, that this academically ineligible student had played for 45 seconds in one game in which they were ahead by 23 points -- he called his team together and told them that he was sending their trophy back to the Georgia State Basketball Association. "I told my team," Cleveland said, "you got to do what's honest and right and what the rules say. People forget the scores of basketball games; they don't ever forget what you're made of."

They don't ever forget what you're made. They don't ever forget who is inside of you. It explains what Vicki and Bill Ball had to say when they wrote their letter to the editor of the local Rockdale paper, Rockdale Citizen, after they heard that the basketball coach forfeited the championship trophy over 45 silly seconds and said, ""We have scandals in Washington and cheating on Wall Street, but thank goodness we live in Rockdale County, where honor and integrity are alive and being practiced."

Now, my friends, is not the time for whatever. For those of us who know that Jesus is inside of us – it is never the time for whatever. You can go to Harvard or pump gas at Sonny's Sunoco, you can have brunch at the country club or a cheeseburger at McDonald's, you can be the President of your country or Vice-President of your HOA, you can storm Omaha Beach or you can pack lunches for school – it doesn't matter who you are or where you are – it is no longer you who lives, it is Christ who lives in you. And the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me, and who gave his life for me.

It is enough, my friends, to change the world.



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Church of the Palms

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