

Making A Run For It

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The story is told of a Thomas J. O'Reilly – lifelong resident of Dublin, Ireland – who died and found himself standing at the pearly gates of heaven. He met there the guardian of the gate and asked if there was a place reserved for him. "St. Peter," he said, "I've been a good man. I have loved my wife and my children; I went to church every Sunday and always paid my pledge."

"Have you sinned, my boy?" came the response. "Well, St. Peter, I guess I did sin a little – especially when I was young and foolish. I bet on the horses a few times, fibbed a time or two, had a few too many drinks once or twice. So I guess you could say I've sinned if that's what you mean. "Actually I was thinking of some more egregious sins," said the gate keeper leafing through the great book of life. "Did you do anything else more serious?"

Thomas J. O'Reilly thought for a moment. "Well, you know the only thing I can come up with was one time when we were in school and playing rugby. I played for St. Thomas's and we were playing against St. Anthony's for the national championship. It came down to the end of the match – and were all tied up. I had the ball and scored to win the game, but there was some controversy. One referee thought I had fumbled the ball before scoring, and the other one said that I had not. They took me aside and asked me to be truthful and say what had happened. Now you have to remember, St. Peter, this was for the national championship so I was in a tough spot. Truth is ... I did fumble the ball before scoring but I couldn't say that and let my teammates down. So I lied and said I didn't fumble. Which meant that St. Anthony's lost the championship because of my lie. You know I

always felt bad, St. Peter, about those St. Anthony boys never getting the credit. But you know that can't be such a bad sin to keep me out of heaven, can it St. Peter?"

"Oh, I really wouldn't know," came the brusque reply, "You see, St. Peter's out to lunch and I'm St. Anthony."

Sometimes there are wounds and losses and injustices that are hard to let go of. I bet that has been true for you. The truth is your life and my life are repositories for the memories we accumulate – memories that make us either thankful and happy, or bitter and angry. Our souls are a mixed bag of treasures and refuse. And strangely enough it is the wounds and the losses and the injustices that are easier to hold onto than the thanksgivings and the celebrations.

At the turn of the last century the landscape of American business and culture was being transformed by the brilliant and diabolical partnership of steel tycoons Andrew Carnegie and Henry Clay Frick. The two men had managed together to amass a fortune that exceeded the entire gross national product of Great Britain. But they had a falling out with Carnegie forcing Frick out of the business. And from that point their lives became a bitter contest to best each other in fortune and legacy. Finally, when Carnegie was nearing the end of his days he offered an olive branch in the form of a written invitation to his old friend and enemy that the two men meet to bury the hatchet. Carnegie's secretary, James Bridge, hand delivered the note to Frick in his New York mansion. Frick read the note and replied, "We'll meet alright. The next time we'll meet is in hell." And who's to know that maybe he was right.

It's hard to let go of the wounds and the losses and the injustices.

One could imagine if there was anyone justified in holding on to the wounds and losses and injustices it would have been brother Esau. Most of us know the story of brother Esau. Esau was the older twin brother in the great Genesis story of Jacob and Esau. Esau was the first to be born of the two and that was to have made all the difference. When you were the first male to be born in that time and culture it meant you were the inheritor of the family birthright and the first in line to receive

the father's blessing. The first born got it all. It made all the difference. But as the story goes, young Jacob and mother Rebekah conspired against the older Esau and his father Isaac – and managed to scheme away from Esau through unseemly deception both Esau's birthright and his father's blessing. And because there was only one birthright to give and one blessing to receive it all went to Jacob undeservedly – and it left Esau not only a castaway from his family – but a wanderer with a yearning for vengeance. He was rightfully and righteously angry and bitter and hateful – and in that culture of eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth – Jacob had it coming to him. He was a scoundrel.

Now the interesting thing about scoundrels in the Bible – especially in the Old Testament – God artfully and creatively includes them in his unfolding purpose. God often doesn't just include them he uses them directly. For it is of the lineage of Jacob that Joseph and his brothers were born – and wasn't that a dysfunctional family. It is of the lineage of Jacob that the righteous and adulterous King David was born. It is of the lineage of all these that Jesus was born. The lineage not of the deserving Esau – but of the scoundrel Jacob.

So Esau wanders away with his spirit of vengeance and hate and bitterness and Jacob runs away and continues in his scoundrel ways. Both are on the run. But then comes the rest of the story – Jacob wrestles. He wrestles with himself and with the angel ... or was it God he was wrestling with? ... Nonetheless, Jacob sends his message to the brother he has so wrongly treated and wonders ... just wonders if they can come together? Can they bury the hatchet? Can they meet in some place other than hell? How will this story end?

It is a question, isn't it, for all of us? How will this story end? How will your story end? For the truth is, as we already know, we carry this repository of thanksgivings and grievances, joy and bitterness, celebration and righteous indignation. Truth is most of us are on the run somehow. Most of us are running away from some grievousness – either our own or someone else's. There's a little bit of scoundrel in all of us that has us on the lam. And there is enough bitterness in all of us that makes us want to run away from someone. How will though the story end? That's the question when the fifth

act rolls around. Will this be another one of those tragedies where the curtain falls upon a sorely divided and bloodied stage? Or will there be a surprise?

For no one could have been more surprised than the scoundrel Jacob when the families and flocks of the two brothers migrated close to each other for their agreed upon meeting. Jacob had already put together the scheme, schemer that he was, to save at least half his family and fortune in case brother Esau would carry out his act of righteous vengeance.

No one could have been more surprised than he to see his wounded brother run to him. Run to him why? To kill him? No – not to kill him, but to embrace him and to bury his head in his shoulder and to kiss him. The story didn't end as we expected – in hell. It ended in heaven. The curtain falls not upon another one of those predictable tragedies – but upon a surprising story of grace and peace.

Grace and peace. Such is the salutation and blessing that the apostle Paul extended to all the churches he wrote to throughout his ministry. Grace and peace. Frederick Buechner said that grace and peace was the best Paul had to give, but it was the best he ever got. Grace and peace extended to him by the surprising visit of Jesus on the Damascus Road and then again by the surprising reception from the church he was in the business of destroying. Grace and peace. The only way to keep the story from becoming a tragedy.

I love the story that Lauren Winner, professor at Duke Divinity School, tells about when she was a little girl she had been selected by her kindergarten teacher to be one of the two students in the class she trusted enough to receive the high honor of cleaning out the teacher's desk. As Dr. Winner tells it, "We tidied and straightened, rounded up all her stray paper clips, and cornered them into one rectangular compartment on the right hand side of her desk drawer. We banded together all the rubber bands and tucked them in the back. We lined up her pencils. We stacked stickers and capped pens. There was one quarter, just there alone, no other quarters. I scooped it into my pocket."

When she got home her mother found the quarter and asked why she hadn't purchased her milk. She confessed. She had taken the quarter from the teacher's desk. Incensed at discovering her little girl had begun a life of crime, her mother had her back in the car and they drove to the school and went to the classroom where mom said to Mrs. Smith the teacher, "Lauren has something to tell you." Lauren presented the quarter and said, "I took this from your desk today. I'm sorry." Mrs. Smith thanked the little girl for doing what must have been a hard thing to do – admit having done something wrong.

Imagine then the surprise when the next week Mrs. Smith came to little Lauren and said, "I was wondering if you would be willing to clean my desk today?"

How is the story going to end? How will the stage look when the curtain falls? Will it be a running away or a running to? For when Paul talks to us of peace – the spirit fruit of peace – like any fruit on any tree it is there not for the tree's sake, but for the picker's sake. In other words, peace is not something we get – it is something we give. And it is in the giving of it that we get it.

Thirty years ago Harvey Thomas was a senior advisor to Margaret Thatcher and at a conference in Brighton where Prime Minister Thatcher and her staff were in attendance the IRA set off a bomb that blew Harvey Thomas through the roof of the hotel and then buried him under 10 tons of rubble. He survived, but not five of his colleagues. A year later Patrick Magee was arrested and convicted for setting the bomb and was sentenced to eight life sentences. He was paroled fifteen years later as a part of the Good Friday agreement that began to bring peace to Northern Ireland hostilities. Moved by the teaching of Jesus, and desperate to shake free from the burden of anger, Harvey Thomas contacted the murderer – the man who in effect had tried to kill him -- and asked for a meeting. The two men met ... and much to the surprise of Patrick Magee ... Harvey Thomas was there to say – despite no apology from the murderer - he had forgiven him. Would he come and visit

his family? Yes, he would. He came to breakfast and met the Thomas family and said to his wife and daughters, "I can't believe I'm here having tried to kill your husband and father."

There's no telling what surprise ending grace and peace can bring.

So how does the story end? Yours and mine? What a gracious question our Lord would ask us? For he is not as much interested in how the story started and how the story got to where it is – for we are all scoundrels and saints along the way. And we all have our bags full of thanksgiving and bitterness and righteous indignation. And I don't suspect any of us feels like we have more peace than we need. So God in his grace and for our peace asks again and again, how's the story going to end? Will there be a running away or a running to when the curtain falls? Will the next meeting be in hell or in heaven?

For peace is not something we get, it's something we give. And it's in the giving of it that we get it.