
We Already Have Everything That We Need

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 17, Year A

In the 1996 movie *The English Patient*, a British biplane is shot down by German gunners while flying over the desert at the end of World War II. The badly burned pilot is rescued by a Bedouin tribe and eventually taken to a bombed-out monastery where he is cared for by a combat nurse in the Royal Canadian Medical Corps. He speaks with an English accent and claims not to remember his name. As he nears the end of his life, he has a series of hallucinations during which he tells the story of a love affair that he had before the war.

The critical point of the story occurs in a prehistoric cave that the patient had discovered while on an archeological expedition deep in the Sahara Desert. He has taken the woman he loves there after she suffered life-threatening injuries in a plane crash of her own. She needs medical help, but the closest doctor is a three-day walk away through a dangerous part of the desert. It's not clear that he can make it to a doctor, that anyone would return to the cave with him if he did, or that she would still be alive when they finally arrived. He nevertheless decides to try. So, he leaves her in the cave alone and sets off across the desert.

Why did he do this?

What was he thinking?

Sam Wells, the vicar of St. Martins-in-the-Fields in central London, takes this to be the defining question of our lifetime. The challenge, he says, is that our orientation toward solving problems can cause us to see everything as if it's a problem to be solved. (You know, if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.) This, in turn, causes most of human suffering. Life is not a problem to be solved. It is a mystery to be lived.

Let's go back to *The English Patient*. The man wants to solve the problem, which he understands to be the woman's medical condition, so he courageously sets off on a dangerous three-day journey across the desert. He doesn't stop to think about whether he has misdiagnosed the real problem. He doesn't see the value of being with her during what may be the last days of her life.

I think that Wells' insight helps us to understand what Jesus is trying to tell Peter and the disciples in the story that we read today from the Gospel of Matthew. You will remember that last week we read the first part of the story in which Jesus asks the disciples who people were saying that he was and who the disciples thought he was. Peter correctly declares Jesus to be the Messiah. This week Jesus describes how the Messiah must undergo great suffering, be killed, and then raised up again. Peter quickly rebukes him. Presumably, Peter had a vision of Jesus as the kind of Messiah who would defeat the Roman occupiers and their Jewish collaborators on his way to restoring the Davidic monarchy.

It looks like confusion over what the title Messiah means, but I think it's easier to see what is happening if you think about the problem that they were each trying to address.

Peter wants to free his people from the constraints of an external authority. He sees the Romans and their collaborators as the problem. You might say that he sees himself in a remake of the story of the exodus where God frees the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors. In the remake, Jesus does to the Romans what Yahweh did to the Egyptians in the original.

Peter fails to notice that Jesus was addressing a different problem. It's more about recognizing an internal authority than rebelling against an external one. You might say that Jesus sees himself in the story described in

the suffering servant passages of Isaiah 53. Living into this mystery requires the disciples to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Jesus; those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for his sake will find it.

Jesus is addressing human suffering in general. It's not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived. Even people outside of the church are starting to realize that it is in the study of love – which they are now calling the science of human connection—that we find the most compelling evidence of the root causes of human suffering, as well as the most powerful ways to address them.

So, to apply Jesus's teachings to our own lives, it is helpful to think for a moment about what problem we are trying to address. Sam Wells claims that for a long time we thought that the essential problem of human existence was mortality. We are anxious about death, of course, but we also worry about all the other things that get in the way of the life that we can imagine—bad health, poverty, and adverse climate conditions, to name a few. There was a time when we thought of these limitations as something that we needed to learn to live with, but now we think of them as something that we expect to conquer.

What if we're wrong? After all, life is more than the absence of disease. What if the essential problem of human existence is not mortality, but isolation?

When you think about it, the challenges that we face today—race, gender, sex, war, poverty, and climate change—have their roots in what we might call a crisis of connection. We are increasingly disconnected from ourselves and each other. We live in a state of alienation, polarization, and fragmentation. We are experiencing decreasing levels of empathy and trust and increasing levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and social isolation. The Surgeon General has even issued an Advisory calling attention to a public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in our country.

Isolation is not a problem to be solved in the sense that we can make it go away with more resources or better technology. In fact, the more successful we have been in overcoming mortality, the more isolation has increased. The more independent and self-sufficient we have become, the more isolated and alone we feel. We are also finding that poverty, various kinds of physical and psychological illness, and other problems that we thought we could solve respond more favorably to improved social networks than to more resources or better drugs.

Jesus knew what he was talking about. Relationships are important, maybe more than anything else. If we could figure out how to be friends with each other, we might not have some of these other problems we are spending so much money to solve.

Let's go back one last time to *The English Patient*. The man with the English accent who is telling the story confesses that he did not find a doctor and did not make it back to the cave in time to be of any comfort to the woman. He seems to recognize now that he misdiagnosed the problem. It wasn't about mortality; it was about isolation. You might say that he lost a part of his life by trying to save it. The irony of his choice becomes clear as his life ends in the tender care of strangers. He receives from them what he was unable to give the woman he loved.

This is the problem that Jesus is warning us against. We don't need to overcome mortality. As we say in our burial liturgy, life is changed when we die but not ended. We need to address isolation. The good news is that we already have everything that we need. We don't need new information, new technology, or more resources. We just need to recognize that we are part of the problem.

As Wells puts it, "We aren't exactly sure what the problem is, but we take for granted that we are a part of it. We do not assume that the solution is to make other people more like us by ensuring that they have what we have and live as we live. We take it for granted that we have a deficiency, and we presume that deficiency is due to the poverty or absence of our relationship with those who have important and invigorating things to share with us, if we could only open up channels to receive those things."

As Jesus puts it, we are losing our lives in our efforts to save them. We can save them by denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following him.

The good news is that we already have everything that we need!

Amen.

For Further Reading:

Samuel Wells discusses The English Patient and suggests that the fundamental human predicament is isolation, and not mortality, in his book titled *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (2015). We will be using this book in Old Fashioned Sunday School during the Fall of this year to explore this topic further.

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