
Sad Songs and Divine Things to Come

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Ashley Carr
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Ah, the get behind me Satan text. On the one hand, it's a great line for the week when Dolly Parton dies, but on the other hand, it's a fierce rebuke from Jesus to Peter, especially when, if we're honest, we all relate way more to Peter than Jesus.

Of course, Jesus wasn't thinking about famous artists when he fired off at Peter. He was trying to course correct his friend and disciple who, despite a really faithful effort last week, found himself yet again fixed on human things rather than divine things. Who could blame him?

From Peter's perspective, things were going great. The team was healing, teaching, feeding, he felt like he was finally getting the hang of things after his big confession, and now Jesus says that actually it all has to end with his suffering, death, and resurrection. But Peter sort of stops listening after the suffering and death part. He can't stand it. The thought of his friend suffering at the hands of the enemies and dying was too much for Peter's brain and his heart. Again, who could blame him?

Peter, like most of us, wanted to stay put in the goodness of life with Jesus. But, no, Jesus says, life with him includes some suffering. In fact, he has to suffer, the suffering is necessary for salvation, like it or not. Oh, and by the way, Jesus says, if we're going to follow him, we have to take up our own crosses. To take up our cross means to take up our own suffering. We have to endure our hard for the sake of resurrection and salvation on the other side.

So, this morning Jesus has called one of his best buds Satan, and told us all to take up our crosses, our suffering. Being a Christian is fun today!

Given that music is on our minds, think for a second about the saddest song that you intentionally listen to. Maybe it's Tears in Heaven, or Fire and Rain or God forbid Landslide or apparently anything that some guy named Noah Kahn writes. For me, that tearjerker song is called No Hard Feelings by the Avett Brothers out of North Carolina. It's a song about dying that opens, "when my body won't hold me anymore, and it finally lets me free, will I be ready?" It's a sad song with tough lyrics about being ready to let go of all the things good and the bad when our time comes.

About a year after the song came out, the band released a documentary called May it Last about the making of that album. When they record this song, it's a pretty typical scene. There's the one brother with a guitar, the other brother with his banjo, there's a cello, fiddle, keys, a drummer, a stand-up bass, producers, sound engineers, all the stuff. They play slowly through the song: Will my hands be steady when I lay down my fears/my hopes, and my doubts/The rings on my fingers, and the keys to my house/With no hard feelings/Lord knows they haven't done much good for anyone.

The song builds to this incredible crescendo where they sing, Under the curving sky/I'm finally learning why/It matters for me and you/To say it and mean it too/For life and its loveliness/And all of its ugliness/Good as it's been to me/I have no enemies. The song fades out repeating those words, I have no enemies.

In this film, the last note fades, and the brothers don't flinch.

The recording light flicks off and the people around the studio excitedly shout, "Excellent! Cool! This is gonna be a big one! It's a homerun, boys!" It's a great song, there's no doubt. But after laying it down, the brothers,

they can barely speak.

The producer says okay what's next and the boys say, woah we need a minute. A cameraman follows them as they walk outside, and he asks why they seem emotional. One of the brothers, the one who didn't even write the song says that he's conflicted because it's the best song on the album. And it's the best song on the album because it took the most sacrifice and living to make. The evidence of his brother's struggle comes out in something beautiful.

Watching it, you can feel the tension of these people around the artists knowing that it's an amazing piece of music but glossing over the really real living that had to happen to make it so. A man wrestling deeply with the demons he's going to have to make peace with before he dies. It took the boy eight years to write this song. And the people around him see the earthly thing, the hit, the money maker. They miss the divine endurance of life and its loveliness, and all of its ugliness, to borrow from their lyrics.

His suffering makes the song. The human experience of life's challenges makes this song something divinely other, special, sacred. I bet that's true for whatever song you're humming out there.

It pains me to say it, but you know that Peter would have been the guys in the studio saying that's a homerun, boys. Peter's hoping for the Light of a Clear Blue Morning, not to steep in suffering.

But that's the lesson Jesus has for us today. We can't just ignore our suffering or play it off or pretend it never happens. The suffering makes the salvation. If Jesus died quietly in a hospital surrounded by loved ones, then I'm not sure the salvation story would be the same. He's pretty clear, he had to suffer, he had to endure torture at the hands of those who feared him, he had to bleed and wail in front of his mama and the ones who walked with him. He had to take up that cross.

So that. Divine things could happen.

Jesus goes through of all of it so that in three days, he could come back. In three days, he could come back holding all of our pain, all of our suffering and sinfulness, the wrongdoings of the guys who killed him. In three days, he would come back with scars. Scars that showed him and us that nothing is too big or too hard for God to hold and even redeem.

Jesus had to endure it so that we could survive it.

We don't listen to sad songs to make us feel better. That's what the bops are for. We go to the sad songs to help us take up our cross and to confront our suffering as we move through it. There is a light of a clear blue morning, there is another side, Jesus shows us that on Easter, but you can't have resurrection without death.

Take up your cross and follow me, Jesus says. Face the suffering, carry the pain, endure the sacrifice. On the other side there is something divine. This is not for nothing.

If we try to skip the suffering, Jesus is going to holler at us. The suffering doesn't negate the goodness, the suffering makes the goodness divine. We don't look at Jesus exclusively for his homerun moments, as cool as the wine, bread, fish, and healing stories are. We look at Jesus for the good he did while he was alive, and for the suffering, death, and resurrection that made him something wholly other, and holy other.

Jesus took up the cross for all of us. With our crosses on our backs, we sing the sad songs of our suffering. But we trudge along with the deep assurance of hope in Jesus. Hope that salvation is possible, redemption is possible, resurrection is possible.

We take up our cross and follow Jesus with the hope of divine things to come.