

IRONIC GLORY

John 17:1-11

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

Seventh Sunday of Easter

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In early 1996 a cast of latter-day Bohemians took the theater world by storm with Jonathan Larson's rock musical, "Rent." Loosely based on Puccini's *La Boheme*, but set in the East Village rather than Paris, the Pulitzer and Tony Award-winning show offered a glimpse into the lives of some struggling artists in the age of AIDS, and despite the complexity of its relationships and its often raucous, though tender music, its message was simple and clear: live each day as though it will be your last, because we are promised "no day but today." As powerful as the musical was and still is in itself, it was perhaps made even more compelling by the sudden and untimely death of its 35-year-old composer the night before "Rent's" first preview at the New York Theatre Workshop.

Most of you know the plot by heart, I suspect – how it chronicles a year in the life of a young songwriter named Roger and his filmmaker roommate Mark, along with several of their friends. Roger is dying of AIDS, and alone in his room one night, he dreams of writing one last song to redeem his increasingly empty life and leave his mark on the world. He sings:

One song... Glory
One song before I go.
One song to leave behind.

One song... Before the sun sets (Glory)
On another empty life.
Time flies. Time dies.
Glory – One blaze of Glory.

Find the one song
Before the virus takes hold.
Glory.
Like a sunset.
One song to redeem this empty life.¹

Roger's song kept bouncing around in my head as I was reading all the "glory" talk in the passage Audrey read for us from John's Gospel. It got me to wondering if anyone else has ever dreamed of glory? Clearly Roger did in "Rent," though a different kind of glory. Not so much the glory of fame or fortune, of which some people dream, especially when they are young. That's what comes to my mind in free association when someone says the word "glory." But that's not what Jonathan Larson's protagonist was

¹ Jonathan Larson, "One Song Glory," *Rent*. 1996.

seeking; Roger wanted to write a song that would offer glory in the form of some lasting legacy to redeem the apparent emptiness and meaninglessness of his final days.

It is, of course, a very different glory of which Jesus speaks in his prayer for his disciples in the seventeenth chapter of John's Gospel this morning. That chapter forms the concluding prayer of a long conversation, extending over the four chapters that make up John's account of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. In John's Gospel, the Last Supper is an extended soliloquy spoken by Jesus. A pastor-friend observes that nowhere else are red-letter Bibles so red.² It is a farewell speech – which is painfully obvious at one level, says Raymond Brown, but helpful if we read it alongside other farewell speeches in ancient literature. It was customary for teachers to end such orations with prayers for their children or for their students who would carry on after they had departed. Our reading for today is the first portion of Jesus' prayer for his disciples.³

Many of us silently voice such prayers as we end our farewell speeches to our children when they go off to college, or to kindergarten, or to the prom. The prayers are perhaps even more fervent and full of angst if our children happen to be African American, or Chinese, or stand out in any way. We tell them what we want them to remember about who they are and to whom they belong, about being careful, and then we say prayers for their safety and well-being. Jesus' prayer is something like that. He prays for unity, which seems in these days like something of a pipe dream.

But Jesus begins his prayer not with words in behalf of his “children” – his disciples. Rather, he begins with words about the hour and about his glory. All through the early chapters of the Fourth Gospel, John remembers Jesus saying, “The hour is coming,” but now, at the beginning of his last supper with his disciples, all that ambiguity is cast aside, and Jesus prays, “Father, the hour has come.” The hour to which he refers, of course, is his hour of passion and crucifixion, and those events will reveal at last the glory to which all the many signs have pointed along the way.⁴ And there is that word, “glory,” yet again.

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you.... [then] Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory I had in your presence before the world existed.” (Jn 17:1, 5)

Time and again in the early chapters of John, we caught a fleeting glimpse of God's glory in the signs and wonders that Jesus performed. But now Jesus prays that the glory will be fully revealed in his enthronement. Of course, the reader knows that his *throne* will be the cross, which is the only way to the glory for which Jesus prays. Michael Lindvall notes, “One can hardly overstate the irony implicit in connecting [glory] to the cross, indeed, the consummate irony in connecting [glory] to a little band of beleaguered

² Michael Lindvall, in a paper on this text presented to the January 1999 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Ann Arbor.

³ Lindvall, who cites Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 587.

⁴ Lindvall.

followers.”⁵ But Jesus is prepared to lay down his life as a manifestation of God’s glory; and he invites his followers into a similar sacrifice for the glory of God. If they seek...if *we* seek... to follow Jesus in earnest, that is the only glory we will find... yet it will be sufficient. It will be more than sufficient.

Does that make sense to you? I think it’s hard in our day to hear Christ’s invitation, in large part because our culture has long promoted a wholly different message. *Times* columnist David Brooks took note of that counter-message – what he called “baby-boomer theology” – when he surveyed commencement addresses at our nation’s colleges some years back. I know commencement exercises have been different this year, and perhaps the messages are different, too, but for a number of years here was what our graduates were being told: “Follow *your* passion, chart *your* own course, march to the beat of *your* own drummer, follow *your* dreams and find *yourself*. This [Brooks said, was] the litany of expressive individualism, which is still the dominant note in American culture.” We have seen outrageous perversion of such individualistic expression in the state capital protests against measures designed to protect the health of our communities.

But, of course, [as Brooks noted some years ago, the] mantra [of expressive individualism] misleads on nearly every front. [All the talk of personal] possibilities ... is of no help to the central business of adulthood, [which is] finding serious things to tie yourself down to. The successful young adult is beginning to make sacred commitments – to a spouse, a community and a calling – yet [the shrill voices speak mostly] about freedom and autonomy....

Today’s [young adults] enter a cultural climate that [names] the self as the center of a life. But, of course, as they age, they’ll discover that the *tasks* of a life are at the center. [Personal fulfillment] is a byproduct of how people engage their tasks and can’t be pursued directly. Most of us are egotistical and ... self-concerned most of the time, but it’s nonetheless true that life comes to a point only when the self dissolves into some task. The purpose in life is not to find yourself. It’s to lose yourself.⁶

In Christian parlance, it’s what we mean by “discipleship” – losing ourselves as a way of discovering our true identity and purpose in Christ... and committing ourselves to a greater good shaped by Christ’s teaching.

Earlier, I wondered aloud if any of you had ever dreamed of glory. Well, here is a true confession: when I was a child, I had a whole range of such dreams. Sometimes I was the one who made the winning basket in the last seconds of a big game, or who bowed to rousing applause on the concert hall stage, or who made the great discovery that cured a dreaded disease. Even then I realized that such dreams were sinful, tainted as they were by self-interest; I was raised in a Presbyterian Church, after all!

⁵ Lindvall

⁶ David Brooks, “It’s Not About You,” *New York Times*, May 30, 2011. Italics mine.

But there was another type of glory dream I had in those childhood days, one which I have rarely confessed. It, too, was saturated in self-interest, but seemed less so at the time, because I felt it had the church's blessing. My dream was that I would somehow lose myself, make a noble sacrifice, perhaps even the sacrifice of my life, for the sake of my faith... and that *that* moment would be remembered as a moment of exemplary faithfulness. Even then I thought it an odd dream... an idiosyncratic dream. Until, that is, I heard the celebrated preacher Fred Craddock share a similar experience from his childhood. Here is how he told it:

Have you ever listened to a sermon in which the line-up of illustrations was Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, and missionaries who had their feet frozen off in the tundra of the north? As a young person sitting in church listening to those stories... I just sat there swinging my legs over the pew... and said to myself, *it's a shame you can't be a Christian in this little town. Nobody is chasing or imprisoning or killing Christians here.*

Then I went away to summer [church] camp... an inspiring time, a night of consecration around the lake, and candlelight, and just everything about it so moving. We sang, "Are Ye Able?" [Are ye able, said the Master, to be crucified with me?] I went back to the cabin and lay on my bunk and said to God, "I'm able." "Are you able to give your life?" "I'll give my life," I said, and I pictured myself running in front of a train and rescuing a child, swimming out and getting someone who was drowning.

I pictured myself against a gray wall and some soldier saying, "One last chance to deny Christ and live." I confessed my faith, and they said, "Ready, aim, fire." My body slumped, the flag was at half mast, and widows were weeping in the afternoon. Later a monument is built, and people come with their cameras. "Johnny, you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let's get your picture."

I was sincere then, as I have been [all] these ... years since. "I give my life," I said, but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check... go out in one great blaze of glory. I thought I could write one big check and say, "Here's my life, Lord, I'm giving it all." And that may work for some. But for most of us, God wants the everyday little checks. The little, unselfish acts of sacrifice that don't cost much, but which seem so hard to give away. I've had to write [fifty-plus] years of little checks: [a dollar here...two dollars there... giving my life away, one dollar at a time.] ⁷

We have all written such checks, friends. Checks paid with simple, unremembered acts of compassion and kindness. Checks paid with little acts of resistance to prejudice or injustice. Checks paid with the sacrifice of time for the sake of someone who needed us. Checks paid with a meal provided, or a gentle touch on the arm, or a

⁷ Fred Craddock, in a story I heard him tell years ago at Columbia Seminary, and told in a different form in Mike Graves and Richard Ward, *Craddock Stories*, St. Louis, Chalice Press, 2001, 155-156. I have combined the two versions in this retelling and adjusted for inflation.

phone call to a neighbor in need, or simply putting on a mask to protect others in a pandemic. Little checks. Countless little checks that have cost us so little. They may have seemed almost worthless to us at the time, but I tell you friends, through them sometimes the glory and the grace of God has been revealed. It may not be the kind of “glory” Roger longingly sang about in “Rent,” nor the glory of my childhood dreams, but it is the kind of glory that will redeem each and every day we have left. I’ve heard people say, “Through the people who have prayed for me, cared for me, I have seen the hand of God at work.” I’ve heard people say that about *you*. And I believe it is true.

It was ironic that a cross would become the throne of God’s glory... ironic, too, that the only road to glory for Christian people is the way of the cross, the way of sacrifice ... and perhaps most ironic of all that such sacrifice, though sometimes demanding our all in some blaze of glory, more often asks of us simpler giving... and relative pocket change. A way to glory... just a dollar at a time.