

March 1, 2020

Genesis 2:15–17

Ephesians 2:1–10

John 3: 16–17

Undead

The Reverend Jay Sanderford

A friend gave me a copy of Nick Hornby’s quirky novel, *How to be Good*¹, last summer. It follows the struggles of an ordinary couple—Katie and David—who live in London with their two kids. Katie is a physician; she cares deeply for her patients. She is a wonderful parent to her children. She worries about the perils of global warming. She recycles. Katie stands up, and speaks out against racial aggression in her workplace and community.

Katie’s husband, David, is a journalist. Almost no one would describe David as a “good guy.” He is bitter, incessantly exasperated, self-absorbed and severely under-employed. Every week, he produces a spiteful column for the local newspaper called, “The Angriest Man in Holloway.” Think of it as an extended and pungent rant about everything: older adults, children, teens, politicians. Nothing is safe from David’s acerbic scrutiny.

As the novel opens, David and Katie’s relationship is wobbly. So much so that it’s hard not to be sympathetic when the core of the relationship crumbles. It is almost comprehensible, at some level. David is not a very good guy.

Then, inexplicably, things change.

David’s life is strangely transformed; his entire worldview is turned upside down when he meets Dr. D.J. Goodnews. Emerging from his transfiguration, David resolves to be good—exceptionally good. He starts giving away his family’s possessions to neighbors who have little to nothing. He welcomes a homeless guy into their apartment. He even begins to organize his neighbors to address the needs of the homeless men and women who are crowding the streets. David’s new approach to life makes Katie very uneasy. And guilty. She was always the good one, the perfect soul. Now David is on the path for sainthood and the award for community volunteer of the year. And Katie is the toxic one. What does it really mean, she asks, to be good? To be really good?

Hornby writes clearly and honestly. He doesn’t settle for easy answers to Katie’s question. David’s clay-footed efforts to be good often backfire explosively, with comic results. Katie’s search for honesty, respect, forgiveness and a path to a good life leads her to try out a local church community.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation. Copyright ©2019. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

It's a poignant, maddening and often funny story. And neither David nor Katie is cast finally as a hero or the villain. Instead, both people come off as frighteningly normal, flawed but fully human. Katie and David are two imperfect souls earnestly searching for an authentic way to live. They are trying to be good.

Some years ago, I shepherded a Presbyterian confirmation class of laconic ninth graders across the street to visit with our Jewish rabbi and to explore some common threads of our messianic faith. We entered a classroom, where a makeshift tent had been erected for the observance of the Feast of Tents or Booths, an experiential time of remembering Israel's wandering in the desert, dwelling in tents, subsisting on water and manna. Attached to the posts on either side of the entrance to the tent were two posters, each bearing a short message: on the left was "From God;" on the right was "To God." There, simply yet dramatically, said the rabbi, was the whole of life: from God, to God, and in the years between, a tent.

Without knowing it, the rabbi's reflection is a commentary on Ephesians 2:1-10. This section of this epistle is widely thought to be the framework of an early baptismal liturgy, or confirmation curriculum. How amazing that the church prepares young people for baptism, or for a reaffirmation of baptism, through confirmation, during Lent. What most needs to be impressed on the candidates on the occasion of being set apart for God and God's service in a world divorced from its creator, dead at its core and confused in almost every way. It is to give them the tools to interpret what is happening to a person entering the Christian life; this is what the writer of Ephesians does for the reader on these pages. To "interpret" is not an academic exercise; interpreting is a usual, visual and necessary activity for every community. It is what a parent does when a child asks, "What is that noise?" as a pack of coyote's yowls in the night. Or asks, "Do dogs go to heaven?" It is what a physician does when a patient worries about persistent headaches or how a virus is transmitted. Teachers do it, as do attorneys, financial advisors, friends, partners and neighbors. As do churches. In fact, interpreting the shape of the Christian faith is a primary activity of the church. We do it through stories, with choirs and songs and worship words. We act it out each time we break the bread of life and openly share the cup of salvation, as we do today. And yes, kids, we do it with long boring sermons! We interpret our faith: "What does it mean to become Christian?" Or moreover, "What does it mean to remain Christian?"

Ephesians answers these important questions vividly, experientially. You were dead. "You were dead through trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world," says Ephesians, but now "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing" (Ephesians 2:1-2). To recognize this announcement as relevant to us, to swallow even one ounce of this claim, we must confess a cluster of truths about ourselves we would rather not face—that we are captive to cultural, political, financial and spiritual forces over which we have little control. These powers have drained the life out of us; we are unable to think or feel or crawl our way free. We are face-down on the tile floor in the kitchen and we are in urgent need of a God who comes to rescue. In short, we need saving. We need to be undead.

But Paul's words hang there: "You were dead." Spiritually speaking, that's Paul's assessment of anyone's life outside of Christ. You were dead. And those who are dead can't do anything for themselves. That's why there is only one piece of good news the Bible has to offer. It's the good news that sparked the entire Reformation. It's the good news that has transformed millions of lives these last two millennia or so. And the news is this: it is by grace you were saved.

We have a hard time accepting this reality that Paul delivers; we'd prefer the truth lay elsewhere. In the venerable comic "Peanuts," Lucy had a score to settle with Charlie Brown. She is chasing him around the house shouting, "I'll get you Charlie Brown! I'll get you! I'll knock your block off, Charlie Brown!" Charlie Brown, who has been running full speed, stops on a dime, turns around and says, "Wait a minute. Hold everything. We can't carry on like this. We have no right to act this way. The world is filled with problems—people hurting other people, people not understanding other people. Now,

if we as children can't solve what are relatively minor problems, how can we ever expect to . . ." At this point, Lucy interrupts Charlie Brown, hits him with a left to his jaw, knocking him out. She says, "I had to hit him quick; he was beginning to make sense." And so it is with Paul. And the pair at the heart of Nick Hornby's novel, *Katie and David*. And so it is with all of us.

We can accept this process, perhaps, in a 12-step program, or in a book group, or by retreating to our lake house, or finding God in nature. Or we can even mask it up for a time by incessantly busy volunteering at our kid's school or at the homeless shelter. Nearly everything we encounter in this text is a description of our true and basic selves that sends us scrambling for safer ground. The fact of the matter is that the gospel is at its root a rescue story. Even Jesus' name, as theologian William Placher reminds us, means "the Lord saves."

The world is messy and incomplete, and we all may struggle with this expansive, loving, forgiving, forgetting God who approaches us with this grace. Another pastor and a mentor, serving a neighboring church in an agricultural region in North Carolina, was once called to visit and pray for the home of a hard-working tenant farmer where all the children had become infected with typhoid fever. The mother claimed they probably got it from their water supply, which came from the same pond where the animals drank. "The farmer has promised us a new well for years," she said, "but he never gets around to it." Just two weeks later this same pastor got an urgent call from the large house on the same farm in which the landowner lived with his family. His children, too, were ill from deadly typhoid. And the sad circumstances meant that his only son and heir was dangerously ill, and he called on the pastor for prayer. As he paced the floor of his richly paneled den, he shouted: "No expense must be spared or stone left unturned. Saving this child's life is of utmost importance to me. You've done it for others, God. I am begging you, do it for me." And so it happened, all while the pastor pondered in perplexed awe how such concern for one child and such indifference to four other children could exist side by side in the same human heart. Yet this is our human condition, this is our near-death experience, and one can blow up in anger or fall down in despair; or focus on the mercy that exists there and seek to build on it and enlarge it.

So there is more in Paul's message. For God, with the bigger picture in mind, God--deep in love and mercy, by free undeserved acceptance accelerated your spirit and life and set you in a safe place in the constant presence of God in Jesus Christ. You are now alive, but not simply in order to enjoy God's grace, God's acceptance. You have been created again as God's work of genius for two distinct purposes: to show what God can do through Jesus Christ, and to serve human need, engaging in good works which reflect the nature of God as gracious love to the rest of the community.

We are not the agents of our own salvation; that much is clear, both from our own experience and from what Paul describes here. At least we are not able to initiate it in any way. It comes from outside of us. "This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment" (Ephesians 2:8-10). But we are agents of our own spiritual growth and development, moving in tandem with the Holy Spirit as we take up the invitation to serve the great human need of our community, our nation and our world. What to do? Look for the broken places in our community and go to those spaces. Look for the places where God's heart is breaking,

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation. Copyright ©2019. All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

and go there. Seek out ministries that join you in partnership with other people of faith and courage. Seek, ask, question and follow your sisters and brothers who have gone ahead of you and can show you the way. Where to start? A quick trip to Cass in Detroit can shift your mindset about how to repair communities—and people. A Tuesday evening at Circles in Ypsilanti demonstrates the awesome power of mentoring and holy friendships. A conversation with our Philippines mission team can illustrate the staying power of long-term partnerships. Paul’s invitation is to come alive to the power of God, and to move into that liminal space of human need and your capacity to be an agent for mercy, justice and holy friendship.

You were dead. That’s a piece of bad news no matter how you slice it. But now you have been saved by grace and are alive in Christ. You are, in the way of Ephesians, “Undead!” That’s a piece of good news so grand, it defies description. And the gospel is here to tell you that this good news is and can be your good news. Alive in Christ. Alive to the goodness of God in all of life to serve the church and the world with as much energy, courage and imagination we can muster. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

© 2020 Jay Sanderford