Broken Hearts and Treasures in Heaven

February 21, 2021

I want to talk about heaven today.

Not the kind of heaven that's an escape from trouble here on Earth. I don't think that's what Jesus has in mind, at all, in the passage that we read for today. It's easy to misinterpret that passage through the asceticism of Plato's ghost again (and, to be honest, our Lenten devotional, "Reflections on the Heart" falls into that temptation a bit, when it talks about treasures in heaven being "invisible.") I don't think that's particularly helpful.

Heaven isn't invisible: we can see it, taste it, touch it, smell it, even, here, now—in those imperishable glimmers of goodness, unforgettable moments of truth, and eternal vistas of beauty that will endure long after we are gone, and long after whatever heartbreaks we endure are healed. To be honest—that's a little bit of Plato, too, not the dualistic Plato, but the Plato who can help us understand treasures in heaven of goodness, beauty, and truth as Jesus means them here, I hope. So, let's go!

Treasures in heaven are like a well, I say, or a river—an everflowing stream that bears us all away, yes, that breaks our hearts with the loss of loved ones, the loss of our own experiences, the loss of life—and yet which promises to us relationship with our Source, our Salvation, and our Delight.

Let me say that again, a little differently: treasures in heaven are like a river, an everflowing stream that bears us all away, yes, that breaks our hearts with the loss of loved ones, the loss of our own experiences, the loss of life—and yet which promises to us RELATIONSHIP with nothing less than our Source, our Salvation, and our Delight—the river of life that is Jesus. One of my favorite books and movies is "A River Runs Through It." I know I've spoken with you about this before, but it seems particularly apt to start here this Sunday, as we collectively grieve together the loss of three of our beloved members—Jan Bilty, Ann Lulloff, and Mel Polarek.

If you don't know the book by Norman Maclean, or haven't seen Robert Redford's cinematic adaption, I encourage you to check them out.

The story is a family drama about a stern preacher man (played by Tom Skerritt), his wife (Brenda Blethyn), and their two sons—Norman, played by Craig Sheffer and Paul, by Brad Pitt. The film is set (primarily) in and around Missoula, Montana, through which flows the Big Blackfoot River.

The Wikipedia summary is actually pretty good: "Set in and around Missoula, Montana, the story follows two sons of a Presbyterian minister, one studious and the other rebellious, as they grow up and come of age in the Rocky Mountain region during a span of time from roughly World War I to the early days of the Great Depression, including part of the Prohibition era."

But to really understand the film you have to know (spoiler alert!) that Brad Pitt plays the younger, rebellious son, Paul, and the novella is an elegy or requiem by the older son Norman Maclean for his younger brother. It is the river that unites them, and it is the river that brings Norman some peace after his brother's violent death.

There are five treasures in heaven in the book and film that are worth reflection on during this season of heart, that do not take us away from Earth, but help us to see its goodness, beauty, and truth in new ways; five treasures in heaven that can help us to see Jesus, in this season of Lent.

The first is the preaching of the Father. Yes—preaching can be a treasure in heaven (or so we preachers hope). Near the end of the film, the father preaches from the pulpit that: Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know who elude us. But we can still love them—we can love completely without complete understanding.

And love—my sisters and brothers, as the Apostle Paul puts it in I Corinthians 13:8—love never dies.

Dinners around the family table are a second set of treasures in heaven in the film. Meals set around that family table are sacramentally-rendered in both the book and the film. One of the meals, in a moment of gentle humor, descends into chaos when Paul—about aged 10, refuses to eat his vegetables—and the father mandates that he sit at the table until he does. A jump cut then shows Paul still sitting at the table as the rest of the family rises for breakfast. Rebellious, yes—and stubborn. But the family table is depicted in scene after scene in the film as a treasure in heaven—something finite but capable of bearing the infinite. And in fact, I think EVERY meal is like that. Every meal, when we eat mindfully, points us to the unity and beauty of everything. We can savor meals with each other, where rust and moth can't destroy—something we've been made acutely aware of during this pandemic, right? Meals acquaint us with treasures in heaven.

Shared memory is a third treasure in heaven in the film. One of the books I want to write yet, if God gives me time, is a book entitled "Brotherhood." I'm one of three boys in our family, and I have some stories to tell—most of them joyful, uplifting, poignant! I love my brothers. And there's little attention to siblinghood in the literature—lots on parenting, lots on mating, but not so much on the importance of being sisters and brothers. Anyway, in the film one of the most powerful scenes is when the rebellious brother persuades the staid and safe older brother to steal an old boat with him and "shoot the chutes" as they call it—namely, ride the boat down a wicked (probably class 5) set of rapids.

"We'll go down in history," Paul puts it, as the brothers steal a skiff anchored on the shore. The soundtrack of the film roars with the rush of the rapids, as the images on the screen show the boys riding in the little wooden boat down the increasingly rough and noisy river. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" exclaims one of the boys, as the boat crashes against the huge rocks at the bottom of the run, sending both boys spinning into the water where it is unclear for many moments whether they will resurface. When they do—surprising and relieving their friends who have been watching horrified along the banks—the boys' aquatic rite of passage is complete. They "shot the chutes," and will share the glory of going down in history.

But the film then goes on, moving now into the household around the family table, to show the boys being chastised by their father for stealing the boat. Paul's dream of glory is dashed upon the rocks of his father's sense of justice.

That scene foreshadows the plot of the entire film, which cascades toward its conclusion like the rush of a great river. In a scene near its end, with Norman back in Montana visiting, the two brothers go fishing together. Paul re-enacts his earlier rite of passage when he hooks a huge fish that drags him body-surfing downstream in the Big Blackfoot for hundreds of yards, while his brother trots along the shore watching. Now, however, Paul is alone, and he has no boat to carry him. As he clings to the fragile filament that connects him to the fish, he completely submerges at times, carried between the boulders, until at last he surfaces, triumphant, having caught a beautiful rainbow trout. Norman, proclaims in a voice-over narration that he was aware, at that moment, that he "was witnessing perfection." His brother's performance at fishing was like a great work of art: a whole symphony, or a perfect poem. "But," the voice-over continues, "life is not a work of art, and the moment could not last."

Life may not be a work of art, but shared memory is a treasure in heaven, and it is the art of fly fishing that is a metaphor in the book for how art endures, like the book and movie themselves, as a fourth such treasure in heaven. Honestly, I think any art can be a treasure in heaven. All art mediates grace, I feel. All art can incarnate the living Spirit, as Jesus did. But in the film, it is fly fishing that reflects God's rhythms—a four count cast.

Norman says, again in a voice-over, that "My father was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation—come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy." He goes on, "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing." And then: "As a Scot and a Presbyterian, my father believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace. Somehow, I early developed the notion that he had done this by falling from a tree. As for my father, I never knew whether he believed God was a mathematician, but he certainly believed God could count and that only by picking up God's rhythms were we able to regain power and beauty." The beauty of a four-count fly cast, like any work of art, might be a treasure in heaven, too, a means of grace.

But it was, and is, finally—the river that flows through and around us all, that is the most profound treasure in heaven in the film, and perhaps in life. I know in my own life, when I have felt broken hearted, I have gone to a river, lake, or stream and found some comfort. Growing up, it was the Wolf or Fox Rivers. In Valparaiso, I would ride my bike to Rogers Lake, it was called, or I would drive the ten minutes to the massive dunes and profound vistas along the shoreline of Lake Michigan. In Philadelphia, it was usually the Wissahickon Creek, wandering through Fairmount Park. And in Wisconsin, I am fortunate to be in touch with the Pigeon River/Lake/Pond—it's really all three—on a daily basis. Living waters are treasures in heaven.

When our hearts break, we find comfort in connecting to our Source. After all, we're all from the same place, we're all going to the same place. The water cycle is like God's eternal cycle: We come from God, and we return to God. Yes, we are Dust—as we prayed this past Wednesday. AND we are washed in the waters of baptism that connect us to the waters within us, the waters above us, and the waters below—rivers of life, flowing clear and strong.

When our hearts break, waters heal us, even save us, as Jesus—the living water—poured out himself for us. One of my first encounters with death was when my beloved grandfather, John Olsen, passed away. As we buried him in the family plot in Lessor in early spring, I remember that his grave was filled with water as they lowered his casket. I thought this was, initially, appalling. But then my Uncle John—known as Buzzie—said: "Well, dad can go fishing to his

heart's content." And my grandfather LOVED fishing. He and my grandmother kept track of the thousands—yes, thousands—of pan fish they caught every year.

The points are all connected. Waters heal. Humor heals. Memory heals. Hope heals. In the river of time, I know connecting with my grandsons has been an incredible source of joy to me—poignant longing and wonder at their potential; longing made acute because I know my potential time in the river of this life is shorter than when I was a parent; and longing that is bittersweet because they represent a future, God-willing, that we won't see fully, but that we can participate in and help to flourish! What wondrous love is this!

And so, finally, even when our hearts break, it is our simple and sheer DELIGHT in the river of life that is a treasure from heaven that will not fail us. We can savor those moments we have together, as we work for justice, for a better world, for goodness, beauty, and truth. For some, that will mean primarily parenting. For others, it might mean participating in politics. For all of us, here at Union, it means working to be anti-racists, to be advocates for immigrants and the homeless and those left behind in our often ruthless economy; to be contributors and participators in the work of seeing God's will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.

So, change our hearts, God. Help us to see that the treasures in heaven you hold out for us are NOT "invisible." They are tangible, real, enduring treasures on earth, as in heaven. And EACH of us can participate in making them real, as our hearts and treasures make possible. Jan Bilty left us the treasure of JOSHUA—and JOSHUA's work for justice on so many fronts. Ann Lulloff left us the treasure of the Brain Center—and our work for healing in so many directions. Mel Polarek left us the treasure of Habitat for Humanity—and our work for safe and decent housing built with the poor. And they all left us with legacies of love—to their families, to our church, and to the world.

All in all, I hope you find in this sermon the hope that there are abundant, even infinite, treasures in heaven that connect to our lives here on Earth—even, and maybe even especially, when our hearts are broken. Or, as Norman Maclean put it, reflecting on sitting by the river, which is both the Big Blackfoot and the river of time: "I sat there and forgot and forgot, until what remained was the river that went by and I who watched. On the river the heat mirages danced with each other and then they danced through each other and then they joined hands and danced around each other. Eventually the watcher joined the river, and there was only one of us. I believe it was the river."

May we find comfort as God washes us in the waters of that river, making us one with it, with her, with him, as are all those for whom we grieve, and for whom we hope. Amen.

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Green Bay, Wisconsin
Matthew 6:19-21
February 21, 2021