

The Truth of Tragedy and God's Love

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Yesterday afternoon at 3:30 p.m. in our Sanctuary, Jessy Stayer and Aaron Heath tied the knot. They celebrated their Service of Christian Marriage. They got hitched ... without a hitch. Vicki Givler talked a little about Jessy in the meditation she contributed to our *Daily Devotional Guide* for Lent for Wednesday March 25. She recounted Jessy's struggle with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, an aggressive cancer that has had Jessy in just about every area hospital at one time or another, including the Cleveland Clinic just north of us, and the MD Anderson Cancer Clinic halfway across the country in Houston, Texas. It's been a long and difficult journey for a young girl not even out of high school when the battle began. Here's what Vicki wrote in our *Daily Devotional Guide*: "Jessy is a fighter and I have seen the miracles God has done in her. God has given her and her family the strength to see each new challenge with the knowledge, hope, and faith that they will come out on top. She is now planning an April wedding [which occurred yesterday], and is moving forward every day, not taking anything for granted. I don't know whether she is aware of it, but she has the love and wonderful support of a very large family, our whole church", and from the looks of yesterday's ceremony, all of North Canton, too! What a day of celebration – the love and support of a very large family, indeed.

What a great day, and what a great service. It was the perfect service to introduce the series of consecutive readings that will flow from the First Epistle of John during the season of Easter. Let's face it, how could a wedding not be the perfect time to talk about love, to talk about God's love. And what is more, Jessica Lynn Stayer and Aaron Allen Heath, were the perfect couple for talking about God's perfect love. We used as one of our two Scripture readings a text from First John that is coming up on Mother's Day. "Beloved, let us love one another, for everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, for God is love." (1st John 4:7) I offered the requisite stipulations about how important it was not to get carried away by the moment or the feeling to miss the crucial distinction between racing headlong to the conclusion that our experience of love tells us everything we need to know about God, and recognizing that it is our experience of God – God's faithfulness, God's willingness and commitment to enter into our lives and our struggles, to bear our burdens and share our suffering – it is our experience of God that teaches us everything we need to know about the meaning of love. "In this is love," John writes, "not that we love God, but that God loves us, and sent His Son to die that we might find true life through His love." (1st John 4:9)

What a great text! What a great theme! What a great Epistle! But as you might guess, knowing Jessy and the struggles she's been through, just beneath the surface of this great day and wonderful moment, there was a bittersweet sense of on-going worry and lingering concern. We all knew the difficult journey Jessy has traveled, and the difficult

future that awaits her still. The battle she's engaged in, the mortal foe we call cancer, isn't going away anytime soon, so that Jessy could ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after. That, of course, is the hope, the dream, but a dream that struggles to convince us that it's not an illusion. Yesterday was a beautiful day, and a difficult day, because everyone here wanted to be in a Frank Capra movie that ends with the fairy-tale affirmation that *It's A Wonderful Life*. But we're too serious about the truth, and too suspicious about silver linings, to settle for wishful thinking. We'd like to think that we can handle the truth, acknowledge it, accept it, embrace it, and learn to live with it.

I got to thinking about the bittersweet side to the great joy we celebrated in our packed house at Zion in the afternoon, while sitting in a packed house at Umstadt Hall for a sold-out performance of *Madama Butterfly*, featuring Gerhard Zimmerman and the Canton Symphony Orchestra. That, too, was a great event, a great day for Canton, a great tragedy in the history of drama. Comedy is fun. Frank Capra is everyone's desire. But great tragedies challenge us with the possibility that happy endings fly in the face of the structure of reality. In *Madama Butterfly*, cultures clash, dilemmas evolve, and it becomes clear that someone must pay the price for our imperfect world.

That sounds a bit like the story of God's love that John is telling in his First Epistle, and more fully in his Gospel, where we read of Jesus Christ paying the price for our sin, sent to die for us because of God's great love for sinners who have lost their way and would be doomed to the destruction of death without God's undying love, unyielding commitment, unrelenting determination to save us from sin and death for life and love. There's a price to pay for living in an imperfect world, a price God willingly pays with the sacrificial self-giving we see on the cross. The story of God's love in Christ has all the markings of a great tragedy, exposing the sad truth about the cost for sin and the nature of reality.

I know that we often use and like to think of the Resurrection as the triumph of a Frank Capra happy ending over tragic ending of *Madama Butterfly*. In addition to this, I suspect that not many of us have typically thought of the conversation taking place on the Road to Emmaus as a debate about great literature, and what that might say about the character of reality and the nature of truth. But thinking about such things in this context helps to capture the essence of a text that displays our travelers struggling with finding the right ending for all the things that had transpired in Jerusalem. They recounted the litany of shocking surprises they had just experienced – the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, the warmth of family and fellowship in the Upper Room at the Last Supper, the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane, the denials in the courtyard, the false arrest, the sham trial, the crowd's turning, crucifixion, suffering and death. Now they were hearing rumblings about an empty tomb and rumors about resurrection.

They were struggling to know what to make of it, as are we. A *Frank Capra happy ending* just doesn't seem to answer all the questions raised by what transpired in

Jerusalem. Jesus went through the Scriptures with them. He walked them through the Scriptural narrative unlocking the meaning of passage after passage, until their hearts burned and their eyes were opened to the truth about the reality of their lives, the nature of our world, the character of God's love, the power of God's promise, and the gift of new life. Jesus didn't try to explain away the events of Holy Week. He led them through the events of our betrayals and denials to his crucifixion and death. These were truths we need to acknowledge, accept, and embrace. These truths were "divine necessities", as Jesus explains them, not in the sense of their being impenetrable mysteries known only to God, but in the sense that they are undeniable truths and unavoidable realities rooted in the nature of our sin and the reality of God's love.

We tend to explain away tragedy by blaming the context of circumstance, bad timing, or just bad luck. In *Madama Butterfly*, it was Pinkerton's selfishness, Uncle Bonze's rigidity, cultural transitions, poor choices, bad reactions, all signs of the imperfect world we live in. In truth, that's exactly it, our imperfect world, which isn't going away any time soon. We're sinners living among sinners, in a world indelibly stained with sin. These are not factors that explain away tragedy; they contribute to it and seem at times to require it, by making it unavoidable, inevitable, perhaps even necessary in the sense that they require God's saving grace by divine necessity. In other words, it wasn't just Pinkerton's personal selfishness, or the rigidity of Japanese culture, or *Madama Butterfly*'s lack of moral imagination. Paying the price for our imperfect world involves forces, issues, and factors that are well beyond matters of individual choice and personal decisions. Paying the price for our imperfect world makes tragedy compelling.

During the homily yesterday, I turned to Jessy and Aaron, and admitted outright that they had been through quite a journey together. Even at their young age life had not been easy. Their burdens have been great. They've been through the valleys. They've passed through life illusions, and have been able to discern the difference between real truth and false hope. That's kind of what our Emmaus Road text is all about. That's what the Gospel is about, namely, challenging us to discern the difference between real truth and false hopes, inviting us to look at the life God gives in Jesus to show us what true love looks like. I ended on a note that seemed pretty formal and quite innocuous, offering a simple blessing. But as I have thought more about the day, the moment, the challenges ahead, the very character of life and essence of reality, I couldn't help but conclude that my simple ending was more profound than innocuous.

"Jessy and Aaron," I said, "God bless you. God bless you in life. God bless you in love. God bless us all." God bless us, indeed, because we're going to need God's blessing, especially if the nature of true love and the truth of God's love, leads from the family warmth of the Upper Room to the Garden, requiring that we follow Jesus on his long walk to Golgotha, where the cross stands as the enduring sign of what love looks like in a world where sin stains the perfect world God intended, the wonderful life we seek. God's blessing is what we need, and it is precisely what God gives ... in Jesus' Name. Amen

A WEDDING HOMILY FOR JESSICA STAYER AND AARON HEATH

Saturday, April 25, 2009, Zion Lutheran Church in North Canton

Jessy and Aaron, I'd like to take a minute to pause and reflect on the magnitude of the day and the meaning of the moment. First, let me say that with your two readings from Scripture, you have chosen two of the most powerful passages of all time witnessing to the wonders of this gift we call love. These passages are more than simply beautiful poems with wonderful lyrics, more than songs, or sonnets, or odes to love. They tell the story of love in action, God's love in action through the life, death, and sacrificial self-giving of Jesus Christ. Just listen to Paul inviting us to follow the example of the God who gave His all for us. "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." Paul isn't saying that our experience of love tells us everything we need to know about God, but that it is our experience of God that teaches us everything we need to know about the meaning of love. "In this is love," John writes, "not that we love God, but that God loves us, and sent His Son to die that we might live through His love." (1 John 4:7-12) That says it all. It says everything we need to know about God and everything we need to know about love.

Jessy and Aaron, you have been through quite a journey together. Life has not been easy. Your burdens have been great. You have been through the valleys. You've passed through life's illusions, and have been able to discern the difference between real truth and false hopes, between love that lasts and fair-weather fancies. You know what Paul is talking about when he focuses on the life God gives in Jesus to show us what true love looks like. That's why this Sanctuary is the best place to celebrate the love you've found, the support you've experienced, the joy you seek in building upon the foundation, following the example, tapping into the power of God's love in Christ. This is the place where we've learned about a love that hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things. This is the place where we've lived the connection between acknowledging our short-comings, confessing our failures, and receiving the good news that we're forgiven ... again and again. Paul is telling us that Jesus is the person – that look in his eyes, the strength of his hands, the wounds he bore, the suffering he endured, the victory over death and the grave forever – Jesus is the one who can teach us about a love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, always. (1st Corinthians 13:1, 4-8)

That is why we're here today, to celebrate your love and God's, because it's that connection that keeps our love strong, and fresh, and true. Look, love needs to jump off the page – whether we're talking about a poem, or a song, or a book – love needs to jump off the page into our lives to become real. That's what Paul is saying about God's love and Jesus' life. That's what John is saying. Love became real in this way: God didn't just say He'd go the distance. He sent His Son and offered His love, in life and death, through how he lived and the way he died, making love real for us. Getting love off the page and into our lives is what has happened for you with this community of family and friends gathered here today, making love real through the support that's been offered, the faithfulness that's been displayed, proof that has taken love well beyond being a matter of words to becoming a matter of fact, and deeds, through the good and the bad, come what may; and let's face it, just about anything that could happen, has happened. I'm not saying that we've looked for the valleys, or that love seeks out the cross; but these are the places where true love is forged, strengthened, formed and transformed. Everyone in this room is here to celebrate the love that's been formed and transformed between the two of you; and what it more, that bond has grown deeper and wider through the many who have joined you in your journey of these last few years. Love makes us stronger by making it clearer how much we need one another, a need that has nothing to do with weakness, but with fitting individual pieces together in a way that makes us whole, complete, you might say perfect.

That's how John said it. "If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made perfect through us." His love is made real through ours, and ours is made stronger through His. It is love that we celebrate today, the love that comes from above, that love that flows from deep within, the love that ties you together as a couple, here within this community of friends and family. Everyone here has had a role to play not only in watching your love blossom, but also in sharing in its bond. While you share your love with vows and rings, we promise to continue to be here for you because, as Paul says, we've got hopes, faith, and love; but the love we've come to share is the best of all, and what is more, it never ends. Aaron and Jessy, God bless you. God bless you in life. God bless you in love. God bless us all...in Jesus' Name. Amen