



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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A Love Bigger Than a Piano

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 25, 2018
The Second Sunday of Lent—Based on Mark 8:31-38*

There comes a point in life when you start to move to the heart of things. A meandering conversation finally reaches its destination. A wandering relationship eventually achieves clarity. The impossible decision is circled about and decisively made.

The Apostle Peter is, by all accounts, the disciple closest to Jesus. Pope Gregory 1st referred to Peter as the “the prince of the apostles.”ⁱ According to tradition, he was named the first bishop of Rome, the most prominent position in the early church. In today’s gospel, Jesus moves to the heart of things as he explains to his beloved disciples that he “must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and, after three days rise again.” And Peter, his most loyal disciple, cannot bear this news. This is not information Peter’s able to hear. He’s left his wife—indeed, his entire life—back in Bethsaida. He’s put everything he has on the Jesus Movement, and he can’t fathom the thought of losing his master and his friend. There must be something he can do to stop this from happening. So he takes Jesus aside and he tells him to stop repeating all this doom and gloom stuff. He likely tells him, “Jesus, nobody wants to follow a Messiah who’s going to die!”

Jesus responds to Peter with the strongest admonishment directed at anyone in the New Testament: “Get behind me, Satan!” Author Emily Heath observes, “It doesn’t seem fair: you tell the Lord you don’t want him to die, and he responds by calling you Satan. But look closer and another meaning comes out. The Hebrew equivalent of the word Jesus calls Peter is *ha-satan*, which doesn’t mean ‘devil’ at all. It’s not even a proper name, really. It simply means ‘the accuser’ or ‘the adversary.’ Jesus isn’t saying that Peter is evil incarnate. Jesus is saying Peter is being an adversary. He is standing between Jesus and God’s plan. So Jesus tells him, ‘Get behind me.’ Put your protests aside and get in line. Don’t oppose me; I have to do this. In that moment, Jesus tells Peter all he needs to know. It’s not going to be easy, and it’s not going to end well, and if Peter is going to stand between Christ and the cross, then he is an adversary.”ⁱⁱ

Adversaries come in a variety of different forms, and the most interesting thing to me is that our adversaries are often the ones who love us and care about us the most. The parent who tells you not to take that risk: “You will never make enough money as a teacher.” The

spouse who suggests you stay in the secure job you know: “We would have to pull the kids out of their schools!” The friend who tells you to chill out and take it easy: “Look, if volunteering at your church is making you crazy, then just quit!” Like Peter, they all have their loved one’s interests truly at heart, but they’re not really helping. Nor are we helping anyone when we become the opponents, when we become the adversaries of the spiritual calls of others.

I think we’re too often best described as “admirers” of the spiritual journey and not truly “followers” of the God who keeps calling us and calling us and calling us. Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard wrote, “If you have any knowledge at all of human nature, you know that those who only admire the truth will, when danger appears, become traitors. The admirer is infatuated with the false security of greatness; but if there is any inconvenience or trouble, he pulls back. Admiring the truth instead of following it is just as dubious a fire as the fire of erotic love, which at the turn of the hand can be changed into exactly the opposite, into hate, jealousy, and revenge. Christ, however, never asked for admirers, worshipers, or adherents. He consistently spoke of ‘followers’ and ‘disciples.’”ⁱⁱⁱ We are reticent about becoming followers, are we not? We are anxious about becoming disciples.

There’s an old story in which a Pentecostal woman took a trip to England and went to services one Sunday morning at a great cathedral. The music that day was majestic and inspiring. The liturgy progressed flawlessly. The woman was quite taken by the service, but she didn’t think she would hear anything that would remind her of her own revivalist tradition. That is until the sermon began, and the minister began to preach from the Bible. Then the woman really began to perk up. The priest spoke about Jesus and the call to single-minded discipleship. The woman, excited and energized, exclaimed, “Amen, brother!” This, of course, caught the staid congregation off guard and they all turned around to look at her. The preacher, amazed by this outburst of enthusiasm, lost his train of thought. He regrouped quickly, though, and began to talk more and more about Jesus. Again the woman got excited and cried out, “Preach it, brother!” Just then an usher tapped her on the shoulder and said, “Madam, you can’t do that in here.” She said, “I’ve got religion!” “Yes, madam,” he replied, “but you did not get it here.”

How true. How true. And the great question I have is, “Can you get it here?” Can you be transformed by God’s great love? Can we be changed in such a way in this place that we’re willing to give up anything in order to grow closer to our Lord or to help others grow closer?

In his book *Turning Point*, Glenn Pashin writes about an event that occurred during his senior year in college, in the midst of the Great Depression. His family didn’t have the money for his last semester’s tuition, though tuition for a semester at Northeast Missouri State, where he attended, was only twenty dollars—and that included the books, too. His father didn’t have the twenty dollars. But his father said, “Don’t worry, son. We’ll go to the bank, and I’ll sign your note with you. We’ll get the money.” They went to the bank the

next morning and the banker had tears in his eyes as he shook his head. The directors had instructed him that without collateral, there could be no loan. There seemed to be no way Glenn would be able to go to college that year. But the day before he was supposed to leave for school, a big truck backed up to their house, and two men laid down some boards from the truck bed to the front porch. He wasn't there that afternoon, but he heard what happened afterwards.

There was one thing his mother loved more than anything in the world besides her family and Jesus, and that was her Gulbransen piano. It was the only decent piece of furniture they owned. But the men rolled it out of the house, onto the boards, and onto the truck. The driver reached into the pocket of his overalls, pulled out some bills, and handed his mother a twenty, a ten, and a five. Then they got into the truck and drove off with the pride of his mother's life. His father threw his arms around her, and she cried and cried. That night his mother couldn't even talk about it, so his father told him, "Son, you can go back to college tomorrow. Your mother sold her piano." Then he handed Glenn the money.^{iv}"

Now if you don't think this was a big deal, then you've never been poor enough to own only one object in which your dignity is embodied. To give this up—to give this up—is a Christ-like love. This is a mother's love for her son that transcends her love of a material thing. This is a mother's hope for her son's future, a hope that triumphs over her pride of possession. This was not easy. It truly hurt. It was deeply sacrificial, and yet a life was changed by her act of sacrifice. And I must believe that many other lives have been moved by the power of her singular example.

There are no simple explanations of what God does for us in the death and resurrection of Christ. How can we comprehend the covenant established between God and Abraham and Sarah as the bearers of the new creation after the flood? How can we know what Peter was telling his disciples?

But there comes a point in life when you start to move to the heart of things. A meandering conversation finally reaches its destination. A wandering relationship eventually achieves clarity. The impossible decision is circled about and decisively made.

Amen.

ⁱ *Letter to Eulogius, Bishop of Alexandria* (Register of the Epistles of Saint Gregory the Great, Book VII, Epistle XL)

ⁱⁱ Emily C. Heath, *Christian Century*, February 25th, 2018, Year B, Mark 8: 31-38

ⁱⁱⁱ Soren Kierkegaard, *Synthesis*, March 12, 2016

^{iv} Glenn Pashin, *Turning Point*, Carol Publishing Group, New York, *Synthesis*, March 19, 2000