

On His Own

Sermon
Rev. Rebecca Clancy
John 1:10-13

I received a strange request last week to officiate at a funeral; strange because I scarcely know the woman who made it. She had been an adult student in a night class I taught, and we spoke at that time on several occasions about problems she had been having in her family, but that had been ten years ago. We hadn't spoken since. "If I'm the closest thing she has to clergy," I thought to myself, "she must have drifted far from the church."

I did remember her story though, and it was a sad one. She was married to an ex-professional athlete, and they had an only son who all his life felt he could never live up to his father. The son again and again pursued success, but only for success' sake and, as is often the case with those who pursue the wrong end, he only ended up failing. His repeated failures led him down the road of alcoholism. This is as much as I knew of her story ten years ago, but now it had gotten even sadder.

The son had just died at the age of 38 of pancreatitis. Before he died, she related to me, he had lost everything – his job, his family, his health -- basically his whole life. His last words to her were to apologize for being a failure. She was utterly distraught by his death because not only had she lost her only son, but too he died with his failures unresolved. There's something deeply tragic about dying with unresolved failures -- whether they be addictions, broken relationships, or failed aspirations – because it is in a sense to be defined by your failures before you've had a chance to fix them, or worse, it is to be

defined by your failures because you couldn't fix them. And how painful that would be for a mother to witness with reference to her son.

Naturally I agreed to officiate at the funeral, though I admit I wasn't looking forward to it. The greater the tragedy, the more difficult the funeral -- for everyone, including the pastor. As I was driving to the funeral home I thought to myself, "I hope at least that there is someone there to mourn him, because it will help his parents to see that he wasn't a complete failure." For no one is a *complete* failure. Everyone in his life blesses someone, some way, some how, some time. I thought it unlikely though that there would be many in attendance. It sounded like he had burned all his bridges, and his family didn't belong to a church.

When I got near the funeral home, the traffic suddenly became congested. In fact, I couldn't even get into the parking lot. I had to park two blocks away. "It must be for another funeral," I thought, but I soon discovered it was for him. There were crowds of people, mostly men. I didn't understand what was going on until the eulogies began. One of the men made his way to the lectern and said words he had no doubt repeated many times before, "My name is John, and I am an alcoholic." He then, with tears in his eyes, addressed himself to the many men present, they too with tears in their eyes. "We've lost one of our own," he began. And this is exactly why they all turned out, and why they were so burdened with grief. They had lost one of their own.

It's hard to lose anyone, but it is particularly hard to lose one of our own. And why is this? It is, I think, because of what we share with our own. Our own are those with whom we share a common identity, a common experience, a common vocation or avocation. And this sharing produces a unique kind of camaraderie. Our own understand. They walk our walk. They shoulder our load. I guess the bottom line is that our own affirm to us what we *should* know amidst those who are our own and those who are not – that we are in this together. And so to lose one of our own evokes our deepest empathy and sympathy.

All this renders very poignant what I just read from the prologue to John's gospel. "He came to what was *his own*, and his own people did not accept him." God made the determination to send his son into the world, and so he did all that he could to prepare the world to receive him. He called a people into being who would be his own. Through fortune and misfortune, over the course of 2,000 years, he nurtured their identity as his own. And then, in the fullness of time, he sent his son into the world to his own.

But to say, as does the prologue to John's gospel, that his own did not accept him is a gross understatement. His own rejected him, and rejected him unto death. They betrayed one of their own. There is no conceivable explanation for such a thing. It is as unnatural as a mother betraying her child or a brother betraying his brother. There is no conceivable explanation, just the statement that it was an act of consummate perversion and depravity. But they were so much God's own that his son bore it. He bore it for God's sake and for theirs. He bore it to *make* them God's own.

Friends, God yet sends his son to his own. He sends his son *to us*. And it is only right that we ask ourselves, do *we* accept him? The fact of the matter is, we accept him only insofar as we accept his love, his love that scorns all boundaries – the boundaries of race, gender, creed, and orientation, that scorns even the boundaries between enemies.

And even if we do not accept him, if we too betray him, we are so much God's own that his son will continue to bear it for God's sake and for ours to *make us* God's own, but he will continue to bear it with tears, the tears that can only be wept by one betrayed by his own. The stakes are that high for each and every one of us.

The sorrow of the man of sorrows is relieved in one way and only one way – “This I command you, that you love one another.” Amen.

