

November 16, 2014 Dog Tired and Godly Joy

I was reading an article this week by Scott Barnes, president of Princeton Theological Seminary.

He wrote about service dogs.

Having a service dog in my family, and in our congregation, my attention was sparked. I immediately began to read:

This year our seminary community includes two adorable black Labrador retrievers. They are guide dogs that quietly and tirelessly help students with vision disabilities navigate our curbs, steps, and a busy road that runs through campus. They go with the students to classes, the cafeteria, the library—and sometimes they roll over to scratch their backs on the grassy quad as their students sit talking with others.

The dogs also come to chapel and lie down next to each other under the first pew. They're long-legged, so they sprawl out a bit in front of the pew. Interestingly, they always face the pulpit.

I preach in this chapel every Monday. I'm very grateful that the dogs make it possible for two of our students to attend seminary and participate in the full life of our community. But it's an interesting experience to look down from the pulpit, halfway through the sermon's best sentence that was oh so carefully constructed, and see a couple of tired dogs looking up at me.

OK...I'm all in. I can picture it.

I'm a dog lover.

I'm a Christian.

I can see those two tired dogs at chapel, looking up to the preacher in the pulpit. I can see the contrast between a seminary chapel and the solemnity of worship with two hound dogs curled up in front.

But what I found most interesting in the article was how Scott used the image of tired dogs to talk about people. He wrote:

*When the dogs come to worship they lie on the floor right in front of the pulpit as an obvious depiction of what we **all** feel. By the time we get to church we've been in the harness a long time. Our squirrel-chasing days were long ago trained out of us, and when we see kids throwing a Frisbee the best we can do is to smile and*

remember. Burdened by the relentless demands of the workplace, the needs of small children, struggles with finances, broken relationships, and anxieties about bodies that don't work as well as they once did, we're so dog-tired when we trudge into worship that we're just looking up for a break.

Maybe something—a hymn, anthem, even the sermon—will feel like God's tender hand touching our drooping heads. Maybe. But the rest of our week has trained us not to expect it. "I'm working. Don't pet me."

What we expect from worship is that we'll be told to keep working. We'll confess the things we've done and left undone. The preacher will tell us that the world is broken and Jesus is expecting us to fix it. And there will be a minute for mission that tries to enlist our time and money.

Most of the people who come to church these days already have a pretty clear sense of their ethical and moral responsibilities. We're well trained and know what we ought to do. There is little gospel in telling us we're not doing enough. But that's the message the church keeps giving.

You know...There is a big part of me that says Scott is right.

I don't think you really need to hear how the world is a mess and God wants you to fix it.

I think you already know that.

I don't think you need to hear how to live as a Christian.

I think you already know that.

I don't think you need to hear about God's expectations for you.

I think you already know that.

Our souls are literally dying to hear a message that will raise our drooping heads off the floor.

What we crave is the blessed manna that comes down from heaven.

What we yearn for is news that will break into our hearts and rekindle our spirits.

I wonder...what renews you?

My dogs renew me.

Every time I walk through the door, all three greet me as if I was the greatest thing since roast beef.

Every morning, every afternoon, every evening, Onix will come and put his legs on me and love me up.

On Monday night, I was laid out on the couch watching Dancing with the Stars. My arm was braced on a pillow. Onix jumped on the couch and proceeded to curl up right on the pillow... As if to say: We're buddies...We belong together... You can pet me now.

Winter, our eight-year-old American Eskimo, loves walks. All I have to say is "Let's go for a walk"...and Winter will sprint at full speed to the front door. Often he won't be able to stop because of the wood floors...so he'll crash into the door. While I don't like the technique...you have to admire the enthusiasm.

Tig is a 12½ year old Siberian Husky. She has bad hips and is losing weight. She is an old-timer. That's OK; someday I'll have bad hips, and lose weight, and be an old-timer too. She spends a lot of her day stretched out on her dog bed. Unlike the other two, she has to pick and choose her active times. On Wednesday night, she walked right up to the couch between RitaRae and I and laid her head down...It's loving time.

My dogs teach me some important truths. In their actions, they demonstrate to me: I am of value...I am of worth...I am appreciated...I am loved. They teach me: Any wrongs I've committed don't matter anymore. They teach me: Life is good, and is meant to be enjoyed and shared with others. Those truths are from God. That's why I hope to have a dog for the rest of my life... But not three of them.

You know, some Bible verses are really hard to hear. They challenge you, disrupt you, and seem to tear you down. The verse that concludes our story today about being cast into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, doesn't encourage me to lift my tired head from the floor. Being called a "wicked and lazy slave" doesn't help me, doesn't motivate me, doesn't inspire me to faith and trust in God.

When the third servant told his master, “Master, you are a harsh man, who doesn’t do what is right” ...my faith is not encouraged by those words.

But I’ll tell you, friends...there is a lot of grace named in this parable of the end times.

This story gives us one of my most favorite verses in the Bible.

It is a verse that encourages me in my journey of faith.

In the parable, on two different occasions, the Master announces to the servants: *Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Master.*

I love those words.

That’s what I want to hear from my Lord when I go to heaven.

Those words inspire me to try to be the person God has made me to be.

They are God’s Words for you today.

They announce to you that you are of great value.

You have great worth just by being you, because God has made you.

You are included in the family of faith, by God’s action.

You have been redeemed by Jesus the Christ.

God has given you the Holy Spirit.

So when your end time comes, these words may be said for you:

Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Master.

Man, if that doesn’t get your head off the floor, nothing will. On your tired days... when you have spent all your energy, and you don’t have much left...

when the busyness of your life doesn’t break for respite...

when your body is weak and your mind lacks clarity and your emotions are frazzled...

curl up in the front pew of the sanctuary of God and listen to the Almighty.

God has a word of encouragement for you.

To recognize the effort you spend to care for your family and the common good.

To appreciate your work of perseverance.

To help you see the bigger picture, the godly picture, above the little details.

This is God’s word for you today:

Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Master.

Throughout the routines of the day, keep that in your back pocket.

In life and death matters, cling to that truth and be blessed.

Words of grace for your journey of life.