

A Road to Nowhere

March 16, 2008

Years ago, I read about a framed postcard that the late Carl Sagan kept right next to his shaving mirror so he was able to see it every morning. The message on the card was written to a Mr. James Day in Swansea Valley, Wales, and it read, “Dear Friend, Just a line to show that I am alive and kicking and going grand. It’s a treat. Yours, WJR.”

The initials are those of William John Rogers. On the front of the postcard was a color photo of a beautiful ocean liner, with the caption “White Star Liner *Titanic*.” The card was postmarked one day before the ship hit an iceberg in the North Atlantic and sank, taking the lives of more than 1500 people, including that of William John Rogers.

Carl Sagan said that he held onto that card to remind himself that things are not always as they seem. On the surface, it seemed as though the writer of the postcard was having the time of his life, but in reality, that passenger along with hundreds of others was about to experience something far different than a glorious maiden voyage on a state of the art ship. It all looked good, but we know now that it wasn’t that way at all.

Certainly it’s not always something so dramatic, but I wonder how many of us get fooled sometimes by the way things appear. We look around us and assume that what we see tells the whole story. We see the person who always has a smile on her face, but we never see that underneath, her heart is breaking and she feels as though life is falling apart.

We look at someone who seems to be successful in his chosen field of endeavor, and we may admire, or even envy him. After all, he’s someone who has all the “stuff” we believe goes with success—the big house, the fancy car, plenty of money to do whatever he wants, to buy whatever he wants. However, what we can’t see, and what we don’t know is that his marriage is in shambles, his kids are estranged from him, and he’s as about as far down into the depths of depression as anyone can be.

Our recent NFL season is a corporate example of what I’m talking about. Everything looked great on the surface for Tom Brady and the New England Patriots—18 and 0, unstoppable according to many accounts. Riding on the top of the world—or so it seemed. But we now know that they probably got there through some less than appropriate ways, after being caught filming opposing teams defensive signals. And we now know that they weren’t unstoppable, that they weren’t the greatest team ever to play the game.

My point is that looks are deceiving, and things are not always as they seem on the surface. And yet many of us get drawn in, scratching and clawing our way toward what we believe to be “success.” I guess we do that partly because we’re products of the world in which we live, and we are somewhat conditioned to pursue those things that the world says are important. Wealth and material possessions are some of the outward signs

of the success we think we want, but I wonder if that isn’t a road that leads nowhere.

When that’s what we’re trying to attain in life, and when it’s all we’re striving for, I’m afraid we’re way off track. The reality is that the things we think are so important really don’t last all that long. Is that really what life’s all about? Is that what counts when it’s all said and done?

If we spend a little time reading about the life of Jesus, I believe we’ll find a totally different set of priorities and a totally different way to live. Jesus knew that things as we see them aren’t necessarily the whole story, and he was forever trying to tell his friends the disciples to think differently, to look at things differently.

In fact, most of the time, Jesus was incredibly adept at turning things topsy-turvy, upside-down. “The first shall be last,” he said. “The meek shall inherit the earth” was another of his sayings. It almost seems as if the point he was trying to make is that what matters, what counts, what is real is the exact opposite of what we may think, and a far cry from what most of us observe and think we want.

His entry into the city of Jerusalem on what we refer to as Palm Sunday is a perfect example. Some of his followers, it seems, had misunderstood what Jesus was about. They thought he was going to be their political and military hero; they assumed he would enter the city like a victorious Roman warrior; they probably assumed that by staying close to the seat of power, they were going to be heralded as someone really special. I’m guessing that may be what many of them thought.

However, the parade that’s described in our Bible passage is anything but a triumphal entry—at least in my eyes. You see, the returning war hero would have ridden in on a magnificent stallion, not a lowly colt, or donkey as some stories have it. It would have been more like a New York ticker tape parade, with all the celebrities and politicians in attendance, complete with marching bands and elaborate floats.

However, that isn’t what happened. The story tells us that Jesus rode into the city on a borrowed colt, and people laid their cloaks on the ground for the animal to walk on. We’re never told how long the parade was, but my hunch is that it was really rather small, and it doesn’t seem as though very many of the dignitaries of the day stayed around to make their welcoming speech.

In fact, I read something in this passage that I don’t think I had ever noticed before. It says, “**He entered Jerusalem, then entered the Temple. He looked around, taking it all in. But by now it was late, so he went back to Bethany with the Twelve.**” You see, it doesn’t say that those still at the Temple rushed to bow down at his feet; it doesn’t say that there were welcoming banners out to meet him. The impression I get from reading those words is that it was late in the day, many folks had gone home, so he looked around and left. I may be all wet, but that seems to be what was going on.

So, what’s the point of this whole story? If we take it as a metaphor rather than as a literal happening, what might be garnered from the story? I wonder if Jesus would want us to realize that outward

appearances are often not very reliable, that what we consider to be success and triumph very often are not that at all, that those we see as in first place are really in last place when it's all said and done. I wonder if Jesus would warn us that allowing our super egos to rule our lives may actually mean that we have edged God out.

I think he would say that we've got it all wrong when we think that the worldview is the only view, that he'd say there's a lot more under the surface that counts a great deal more than what we can see with the naked eye. It's like the ending to the delightful story of "The Little Prince." The fox and the little prince have become friends, but it's time for the little prince to go away. The fox finally shares the secret of life—a very simple secret. He says, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." What is real and lasting and important is, in truth, something we cannot see or touch in a tangible way.

If we want to avoid a road that goes nowhere, then maybe we need to look a little deeper, and wait patiently for truth to be revealed to us. You see, we really only have a tiny part of the bigger story, the big picture, and we can't quite understand what it's all about. In some ways, most of us are like members of a college drama class. In order to save money, the school purchased just a few scripts of the play they were to perform and then cut them up into separate parts. Then they began rehearsal, but nothing went right. They missed cues and mangled the entire thing. After an hour, the cast gave up.

Finally, the director asked all the actors and actresses to sit on stage and he read the entire play to them. When he was finished, one of them said, "So that's what it's all about!" Only when they heard the whole story were they able to understand what it was all about.

We can't know the whole story, but we certainly have some strong clues as we move along our life journey. If we pattern our lives more after the life Jesus lived, I have a hunch that we just might find ourselves on a road that leads to real meaning, rather than a dead-end path.

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we can remember that things are not always as they seem, but regardless, God's goodness and love will ultimately triumph. Let's remember that right will win out over wrong, that life will overcome death, that hope will outlast despair, that joy will wipe out our sorrow. With God, all things work for good.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.