

September 6, 2015

Red Balloon

I don't see much litter or trash along the road on the way to my ranch. Now and then, in the bar ditch of the county road, I spot a beer can or a plastic jug. So I was surprised to see a splash of red foil shimmering in the branches of a mesquite tree when I pulled up to my barn which is located a half-mile off the road.

"Whose garbage is *that*?" I grabbed a sack of feed from the bed of my truck. I carried it to the tack room and gave no more thought to the litter until the next morning when I found that, during the night, the wind had blown the red foil to my porch where it got wedged beneath my rocking chair. That's when I notice it wasn't a piece of litter at all.

It was the crinkled skin of a once happy balloon. I stretched it out and smoothed the foil with the palm of my hand. There were no words printed on the candy red circle. Was it was Valentine balloon? If so, its color hadn't faded in seven months. Maybe it was a birthday balloon or a *quinceanera* balloon or, maybe, it had accompanied someone home from a hospital, its string attached to the handle on a basket that held a plant with a card on a plastic stick wishing the patient a speedy recovery.

Now the balloon, or what was left of it, lay at my feet smiling up at me like an old dog, saying, "I love you, pal. Don't kick me."

It reminds me of a legend told about mice infesting the monastery of St. Martin de Porres. "What are you doing here?" Martin asked the mice. The story does not record a verbal response from the head mouse. However, not wanting to poison the mice, Martin negotiated a deal. If they agreed to leave the monastery and take up residence in the courtyard, he would come and feed them on a daily basis.

I was dealing with trash, not mice. Nevertheless, grace scurries into our lives under many guises. I left the deflated balloon beneath the rocking chair. The next morning it was gone, carried away by the wind to bring someone else a reminder of a birthday party, a valentine gift or a get-well card. A good reminder that humble tokens of love spread their message of goodwill further than we know and in a place we never imagine.

September 13, 2015

Marvin

You never know when Christian duty calls. Consider the story of the Good Samaritan. That parable comes to mind every time I spot a vehicle pulled off alongside a road. Most times I just zoom on pass. In this age of cell phones, I figure whatever help a person needs—a tow truck, a lug wrench or a ride into town—can be arranged without too much trouble.

But, a few days ago, I came upon a car along the side of a service road. A young man was on his hands and knees in the ditch. I thought he was sick. I pulled over, rolled down my window.

“You okay?”

He stood up and nodded. Then he pointed to his car where a young woman was seated on the passenger side. “She lost something,” he said.

“What she lose?” I asked. “A contact lens? I can help you look.”

He gave a slight smirk and I realized I was being more intrusive than helpful. Then he glanced at his feet, suddenly his face brightened, “There it is!”

He lunged for the grass like a baseball player for home base. Soon he was back on his feet, back at the door of my truck, squeezing a bullfrog against his chest. He bent down to look at me through the open window. “His name’s Marvin.” The guy held out the frog and waved the front leg in my direction.

Marvin did not look happy.

“Thanks, for stopping,” the guy said. He headed back to his car and handed the frog to his girlfriend. I drove off, wondering what spiritual significance I might glean from this encounter.

I don’t think I can use the story in a homily about strangers in need of help. And I don’t think the search for a lost frog will shed much light on the parable about the lost sheep. Nor will an incident involving a frog named Marvin offer much inspiration when preaching about *Love is patient, love is kind, love endures all things*.

Still, I’m glad I pulled over and offered my assistance. Not that I’m concerned about the care and feeding of bullfrogs, rather, I just find people interesting and often very funny. I suspect God does, too.

And that’s a lesson that I don’t mind being reminded of.

September 20, 2015

Pillar of Smoke

Back in 2011, the first year of the drought, I remember turning off US 287 at Estelline and heading for Quitaque. I love that stretch of road that winds along the top of a tall ridge through the rolling plains along the Ox Bow Ranch. But that particular day, the expansive view was marred by four pillars of smoke rising up from grass fires scattered across hundreds of square miles.

In the Bible, we hear lots of stories about Israel's sojourn in the desert and the Pillar of Fire and Smoke that rested above the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle of the Lord. Whenever it came time for the people to strike their tents and move to another campsite, the Pillar would move and the people would follow.

As I drive the ridge, I meet a firetruck and a water wagon. I wave but the drivers don't notice. Their faces are grim and their eyes are set on the road as they speed by. I would expect nothing less. Wild fires put people on high alert. Teamwork, communication, and organization are top priorities and wasting time and losing focus have immediate consequences.

I imagine the same skills and intense attitudes were found among the people of God during those forty years in which they wandered the Sinai wilderness. Living in close proximity to burning fires and pillars of smoke is bound to have an effect.

How does your current state of mind reflect your proximity to God? Chances are, if you're clear about your objectives, if you're focus on where God is leading you, you're taking care of business, as they say. However, if you're a bit confused, uncertain, and looking back to Egypt as opposed to the Promised Land that lies ahead, well, you might want to take a cue from those guys on the firetruck heading as fast as they can to a Pillar of Smoke rising above the plains.

Our God is not a God who stays in one place. He is a God on the move and He expects us to move with Him. A Pillar of Smoke by day. A Pillar of Fire by night. This is how He led the Israelites of old. And this is how He leads us today: with focus, with intensity, with the Promised Land up ahead.

Keep your eyes peeled. Keep your eyes open for signs of fire.

September 27, 2015

Teachers

A good teacher is worth his or her weight in gold. I'll like to tell you about an amazing teacher I know (and brag at the same time, since he's a relative). His name is Jesse Peters, the son of my first cousin, Donna and her husband, Bob.

Back home in Ohio, Jesse is a well-known, full-time horse trainer. But he's an even better teacher of human beings. I first noticed this when he managed the equine studies department at a vocational high school in Cincinnati.

You might wonder why a vocational school would have an equine department down the hall from industrial arts and auto mechanics. Actually, Jesse taught his classes in a separate building complete with an indoor riding arena, stalls, stables, hay storage. All of it surrounded by paddocks lush with green grass. The horses were beautiful. But it was Jesse's students who shone.

Many of his students came from the inner city and had never been inside a barn. They entered the equine program in the hope of landing a job at a race track someday in southern Ohio or Western Kentucky. Some of the kids were downright afraid of horses!

But under Jesse's guidance, every student excelled. Why? Because he has a knack for identifying whatever dream, need or deep-down hope that God has given to each and every individual. How does he do it? I can't give you the details, but I can tell you that it starts with his first conversation with each student. You see, whenever you talk to Jesse, you have the distinct impression that, as far as he is concerned, you are the only person in whole world that matters. And his interest in you is as genuine as the light in his eye and the hand on your shoulder. He's with you 100%, and he follows through. In fact, he's the only high school teacher I know who can maintain a 94% class attendance rate. (I'd never have known this if not for an article about him in Western Horseman Magazine.)

When St. Paul wrote his letter to the Thessalonians, he mentioned that he and his companions shared with them not only the Gospel of Christ, but their very lives. That's what makes an effective teacher, catechist, pastor, parent, and coach: the sharing of one's heart along with one's knowledge.

We've all had teachers who helped us become the persons we are today. May God give us the grace to return something of the favor we received from such good guides, teachers like Paul and horse trainers named Jesse.