

You Were Dead

Rev. Katherine C. Kerr

First Presbyterian Church – Charlotte

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The best movie ever made, according to me, is *The Princess Bride*. Now, you can talk to me about your *Citizen Kanes* and your *Shawshank Redemptions*, you can argue for *Schindler's List*, *Casablanca*, or *Gone with the Wind*, or in the case of my husband, *Caddyshack*, but you will never convince me that any movie is better than *The Princess Bride*. It has everything one could want in a movie- romance, intrigue, swordplay and Billy Crystal. It's the perfect movie.

A few years ago, when Jim Miller was our Associate for Christian Education, he issued a challenge to his fellow Associate Pastors. We were putting together a "Faith and Film" series for Adult Education one summer, and he challenged us to use a film no one would immediately think of in terms of it delivering a message of faith. Naturally, I chose *The Princess Bride*. And I had my work cut out for me. As great a movie as it is, it's not exactly packed with messages of faith.

But as I worked through it, I stumbled upon a surprisingly powerful moment. In case you haven't seen the movie, I'll try to sum it up for you: The story is framed by a grandfather's visit to his sick grandson. He brings with him a book which he wants to read, and his grandson reluctantly puts down his video game and grudgingly listens as grandpa begins to read. He tells of a beautiful young woman named Buttercup who lives on a farm in a faraway land in a time long ago. Buttercup finds herself in love with the Farm Boy who works on her property. As soon as the two fall in love, the Farm Boy, whose name is Westley, heads off to seek his fortune on the high seas. Sadly, word comes to Buttercup that Westley's ship was attacked by the Dread Pirate Roberts, and there were no survivors.

Soon after, Prince Humperdink notices the beautiful Buttercup and convinces her to marry him. He sweeps her off to his castle and begins planning their wedding. One day as Buttercup is out riding her horse, she is abducted by a motley gang of three men. They whisk her away across the water, knowing that Humperdink will follow. While on the water, they notice someone following them, and soon realize that a man dressed all in black is in hot pursuit. The leader of the crew dispatches the expert swordsman to deal with the man, but he is unsuccessful. He then has his muscular sidekick, whom he calls a brute, square off against the man. He, too, fails. Finally, the ringleader engages in a battle of wits with the man in black. He too, fails.

The Princess, who has been blindfolded most of this time, has no idea who this man is who has now taken the place of her captors. She resists him and tells him that the Prince will be hot on his trail in no time flat. There is a rather heated exchange between them, and after some time and a bit of drama, she finally realizes that the man in black is, in fact, her beloved Westley. She is thrilled, but Westley, still smarting from her engagement to Humperdink, asks Buttercup, “Why didn’t you wait for me?” She looks at him and replies, “you were dead.” Westley responds, “death cannot stop true love. It can only delay it for a while.”

Now, this is just a scene from a movie and, as such, has significant limits as an illustration for the Christian life. But I heard something in this exchange that I hadn’t noticed before. Call it an occupational hazard, I guess- hearing scriptural references when they aren’t actually there- but when Buttercup said, “you were dead,” I immediately thought of Ephesians 2. She understandably assumed that, since Westley was dead, that he wasn’t coming back and their love was over. She wasn’t happy about it, but she moved on. She never could have expected that, after all she had been through, Westley would come back and save her.

In Ephesians 2, Paul uses the imagery of death to describe the human situation of sin and separation from God. Living according to the flesh, as we all do, kills us. We are dead in sin. And it is easy to think that, being dead like that, we are through, that there is no way that God will come back for us, much less love us. It is why many people struggle with the church, or fear giving themselves over to faith, because they cannot believe that God’s love could possibly be for them.

But Ephesians doesn’t stop with “you were dead in your trespasses and sins.” And scripture doesn’t either. It’s not the end of the story. “For God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.”

God has not only come to us in our sin-deadened state, but that he has actually given us new life in Jesus Christ.

This, friends, is covenant love. It is how God chooses to be in relationship with humankind, and it is the kind of love that cannot be broken- not by sin, and not by death. Covenant stretches back to the very beginning- to Adam and Eve, and to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses and to David. It is phrased in the Old Testament as “you shall be my people and I shall be your God”- it is more than a contract, it is a promise for relationship. In the Old Testament, it calls for obedience- keep my commandments and I will love you.

In Jesus Christ, God ushered in a New Covenant, a fulfillment of the covenant promises made to the people of Israel. Jesus said in John’s gospel, “if you love me, you will keep

my commandments.” This covenant, initiated by God, doesn’t demand obedience in order to be fulfilled. It is fulfilled by God’s gracious initiative, and it calls us to obedient service.

We can fall short again and again- allowing pride and greed, arrogance and fear to pull us away from God. But that doesn’t stop God from loving us.

It’s why we confess our sins corporately every Sunday. We have to acknowledge to ourselves and one another that we are not perfect. And, more importantly, we have to hear, and believe that, in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

It is one thing to know this in our heads, and to say it as part of our worship each week, but it is another thing entirely to allow it to transform our thinking and our living. We can know that God loves us, but it can be hard to believe that God forgives us. The kind of love scripture tells us that God has for us is a love that our human minds, hearts, and egos, can have a difficult time coming to terms with.

I like the way Frederick Buechner explains it:

Like Moses, Jesus believed that if you obey God, God will love you, but (in his suffering) he is saying if you don’t obey God, that doesn’t mean that God won’t love you. It means simply that God’s love becomes a suffering love; a love that suffers because it is not reciprocated, a love that suffers because we who are loved suffer and suffer precisely *in* our failure to reciprocate.¹

From the beginning of time, humans have tried to make sense of God’s powerful love and covenant promise. Though we all experience both unconditional love and unrequited love, there is no way that we can ever truly know what it must be like for God to love this broken, messy, sinful, selfish world that he created.

But that hasn’t ever stopped people from trying to capture it. They have written and thought, spoken and sung of the ways in which they have experienced God’s love. Some of the greatest works of art, literature, and music exist because a person was moved by God’s love and couldn’t keep it in.

Thomas Chisolm was one of those people. I think a lot of people would say that he came pretty close with his most well-known attempt. A native Kentuckian born in a log cabin in 1866, Chisolm was converted to Christianity in a revival meeting when he was 27. At age 36, he entered the ministry, but was only able to serve for one year due to poor health. He spent the rest of his life living in New Jersey and selling insurance. During that time, he wrote nearly 1,200 poems and had several hymns published.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*.

Without a doubt his best-known work is the hymn, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” Of it, he said this: “My income has not been large at any time due to impaired health in the earlier years which has followed me on until now. Although I must not fail to record here the unfailing faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God and that He has given me many wonderful displays of his providing care, for which I am filled with astonishing gratefulness.”²

There was no major calamity that led to Chisolm’s penning of this well-loved and oft-sung hymn. It didn’t arise out of his conversion experience – he wrote it when he was in his fifties. It was a response to a lifetime of experiencing God’s love in ways large and small, and an inability to keep from singing.

You hear us say almost every Sunday that we affirm our faith and offer our prayers and present our offerings in response to God’s word and God’s grace. We do not say that simply because of where those actions fall in the order of worship. Those actions fall where they do because of what we believe- that what we have to offer – our statements of faith, our songs of praise, our prayers, our gifts and our talents- are always and only a response to the great love which claimed us before we were born and brings us back time and again from the depths of sin.

“you were dead.” Dead in your selfishness and your greed. Dead in your apathy and your ignorance. Dead in your gluttony and your laziness. Dead in your pride and your arrogance. Dead in your fear and your insecurity.

You were dead, but that didn’t stop God from meeting you there and giving you new life in Jesus Christ. Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God.

² Gaither Music, “Great is Thy Faithfulness: The Story Behind the Hymn.” <http://gaither.com/news>