

## With or Without Us

Wayne Waibel – 06/16/2024

One of, if not the single most triumphant aspects to a life of love in Jesus Christ is the fact that this great love flows without even a hint of effort on our part. We are the beneficiaries of a glorious new age because God elects to include us in His redemptive work through His Son.

The true love that every human being deeply longs for has already been given to us in Christ, who proclaims the priority of love over law.

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Back in the sixth century B.C., there was an entirely different vibe at play. Different, but with the same end game. Ezekiel, as with most prophets, had the unfortunate task of not only warning the prevailing leaders that their treacherous ways would undo their little kingdom through conquest, the prophet would then have to endure being vanquished along with the rest of the people.

Not just defeated, but utterly destroyed. The entire culture and all its architecture reduced to rubble and its people driven from their homes to be occupied and oppressed by yet another empire.

All the while, the prophet is tasked with offering this beleaguered people hope in a future they can in no way even remotely imagine. That's the job. Often, our times of greatest growth will not be our times of tranquility.

It is into this bleak and hopeless existence that Ezekiel champions the image of a God who can and will recover the remnant of His people. The vivid imagery that the prophet employs in the discharge of his calling to instill hope stands in stark contrast to the reality his oppressed contemporaries are subjected to continuously. Therein lies the secret to its effectiveness.

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It is equally difficult for us in our time to embrace God's reconciliation of creation because we are on the other end of this paradigm. We belong to empire. We are the oppressors, the conquerors, the mitigators in the great fallacy that we know best how to manage this world.

The accusation is a little harsh, and not completely void of redeeming qualities, but the truth is that as Americans, there lies at our core a belief in our righteousness. We profess that we are one nation under God, but our leaders belie that founding precept constantly, and without remorse.

How often have we heard the phrase, "We are a nation of laws," spoken in a boastful almost reverent manner? And those who espouse that sentiment are not lying – we are.

We can't hire enough police to enforce those laws. We harbor a citizenry that will not abide those laws, and the good people among us have a most difficult time discerning which of these volumes of laws apply and to whom.

We've lost sight of the world God created where love is above law. Christianity has grown accustomed to the comforts of affluence and the entitlements of empire.

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As with the first generation of Christians – we find our salvation in an intimacy with Christ that grows in us as certainly and as effortlessly as a seed grows. It is the nature of God's reign to grow and to manifest itself. That kingdom will come - with or without us.

To recognize the reign of God, we will need to adopt or be given new ways of perceiving. It's an exciting time. The "old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." And that will definitely include the way we perceive the world in which we live and move and have our being.

The reign of God will mess with established boundaries and conventional values. Just look at ancient Israel. Despite the various and far more powerful empires that subdued the house of Israel, none of them still stands while Israel continues to survive.

And it is surrounded by nations sworn to destroy it. Our sovereign God is indeed in the business of upsetting normal expectations.

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God's power can be seen in the shocking reversals and upheavals that upend all of our expectations and our assumptions about power and prestige. One need only look at the lowly mustard seed.

It is a thing that is impossible to stop from growing. It doesn't matter if it pollinates on the back of a bumble bee or the shoelace of a hiker – it will find purchase, and ultimately germinate, take root, and become home to all manner of insects and critters.

Small beginnings can yield great outcomes. As I enter the seventh year of my call here at the First Presbyterian Church of Belle Plaine, I marvel – not only at your limitless capacity to tolerate, but your unbridled resilience in the face of overwhelming odds. These doors should have been bolted shut long ago – but somehow, you've managed to adopt the Vulcan salutation to live long and prosper.

What you don't see are the folks who join us in worship online. There is a community out there that is finding their church home with us. We all know that faith in Jesus does not inoculate us against the reality of hardship, but reframes our life with Christ – not us – at the center.

What we are finding as we grow into our life of love through Jesus Christ is that the power of the imagination is even more important than the power of the will. And in the vistas that imagination allows us to discover anew, we encounter the Realm of a God fully invested in a humankind yearning perpetually to breathe free.

We may be a part of empire, but only by association. In our deepest understandings, we know we belong to a God who mercifully considers us a work in progress. And we are at peace. Amen.