

Understanding Backward; Living Forward

^{NRS} **John 2:13** The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. ¹⁵ Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." ¹⁸ The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" ¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But he was speaking of the temple of his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

You know, sometimes you don't understand something when it happens to you at the time. Sometimes you experience something and it takes you a long, long time to really understand just what exactly took place.

Soren Kierkegaard, that cranky Danish philosopher I like so much knew this. He said life must be understood backwards- but it must be lived forward. Life must be understood backwards, but it is lived forward. So to Kierkegaard we really only understand the things that happen to us with perspective, with the passing of time. But unfortunately life doesn't stop for us to contemplate it's meaning. It just keeps coming at us whether we like it or not, and we just have to come to peace with the fact that most of what's happening to us on from day to day- well we're just not going to be able to comprehend it all, not fully anyway, until much, much later. Life is understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

Now we don't like this. We like things that are more simple, that make sense to us quickly. But, and this is especially true with the things that are the most important to

us, the relationships we have with someone, a piece of great art or music, or our faith- we just can't comprehend these things at first. You just aren't going to sit down, have an ah-ha moment and figure it all out at once. No, it's going to take time. And you might get a little bit one year, then a little bit more the next.

Igor Stravinsky found this out the hard way. Igor Stravinsky, one of the greatest composers of the 20th centuries- did you know he wasn't even supposed to be a musician. Although he was interested in music as a young person his father set up an audition with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, at the time the greatest Russian composer around. Stravinsky showed nothing out of the ordinary, and Rimsky-Korsakov advised him not to give up his day job. And so Stravinsky's father enrolled him in law school. But Stravinsky never let his dream go- and after his father's death, he managed to get another hearing with Rimsky-Korsakov. Rimsky-Korsakov again told the young man not to enroll into the conservatory, but this time he said it because he wanted Stravinsky to study privately with him. And some argue that this famous second chance changed the face of music forever.

Stravinsky not only studied with the master, but in time he would outstrip him, becoming the most influential musician of the 20th century. And the piece that changed the landscape: *La Sacre Du Printemps*, *The Rite of Spring*.

A man named Sergei Dhiagalev ran this avant-garde bunch in Paris called *La Ballet Russe*. And going on a hunch he hired the young and untested Stravinsky to compose several pieces for him- the first being *The Firebird*, probably Stravinsky's most popular and well known music still today, and then later, *The Rite of Spring*. Now in *The*

Rite Stravinsky was trying to evoke what life was like back in ancient Russia. The story of the ballet is a May day kind of ritual where a young girl is sacrificed to the gods by dancing herself to death. It's like *Girls Gone Wild* for the Classical music world. And in order to evoke this kind of primeval scene, none of the kind of ordinary musical vocabulary would do. You couldn't use smooth melodies and conventional rhythms- it would sound too much like everything that had come before. And so Stravinsky introduced the world to two new things never used in quite this way: he used jarring dissonance, music that create tension, and rhythmic irregularity- instead of regular meters of 3 or 4 he skipped around with measures of 9, 11, and even 17 beats. And even the more normal sounding parts, like the famous opening bassoon solo- he composed at the very highest limit the bassoon could go, making it sound really weird.

Well if you are an average French ballet goer, a Jean Pierre six-pacque, and you were just going out on the town for a nice night out, a nice dinner, a nice show- believe me this was not what you were expecting. This was no swan lake. In fact not only is it not what you were expecting- but it's like your worst nightmare. It would be like if you went out to see *You've Got Mail* and you wound up seeing *Friday the 13th* by mistake.

Opening night, May 29th, 1913 at Theatre Des Champs-Elysees something happened that I think most of us in America just have a hard time believing: a riot broke out at the ballet. Reports say that even from the very first notes from the bassoon- notes that sounded strained and unmelodic- boos and shouts started coming from the conservatives in the audience with the avant garde responding back. As the music went on and got stranger and stranger, the shouting turned violent with fist fights beginning to break out. The cops were called in. Stravinsky fled backstage for his life where he found

Dhiagalev madly flipping the lights on and off thinking that might settle everyone down- it probably only made things worse. And all the time Vaslav Najinsky, the dance director, was shouting out the beats to the dancers to keep them on track amidst all the chaos. I mean this is like a monster truck rally and the ballet all rolled into one.

And do you know why? It's because Stravinsky did things no one else had ever done before. He created music no one had ever heard before, and they did not understand it. And sometimes when we face something we don't understand, we attack it, blaming it for making us feel so confused and out of sorts.

This is what's happening in the text this morning, too. It's a great story, isn't it? Our little Jesus-meek-and-Jesus mild going absolutely nuts in the temple. I particularly like this version in John here- it's the only version where he's running around with a whip, it's like the Indiana Jones version. I love it.

Well it's no surprise he upsets the guys running the show. Everybody's jaws are dropping all over the place as he's overturning tables and chasing the animals and the money lenders out of there. In my own mind I like to imagine him smashing a guitar or two as well- just for good effect.

Now the leaders of the temple- they are so predictable. They get right in his face and say, "Now what's the meaning of this? What kind of reason can you give us for doing this?" They say literally, "What kind of sign, what kind of rule can you give us for doing this?" And this is such a ridiculous response I think. So business as usual. I mean you don't talk about signs and rules with a crazy looking guy holding a bull whip, right. You could probably guess he's not all that interested in things like that.

But Jesus humors them and instead of just whipping them, which would have been awesome, he responds to them. But what he says, well it's really weird. He says, "A sign? You want a sign? Ok, tear down this temple, and I'll build it back up in three days."

Now this is a VERY strange thing to say. It confuses the leaders- and it disturbs his disciples, too. See right before this when the disciples are watching Jesus tear the place up, they're talking to each other about this Psalm that talks about having zeal for God's house- and this is how they see Jesus here. They see Jesus restoring the temple, cleaning it out. Like he's not destroying the temple- he's fixing it. And so when the leaders ask him why he's doing all this- he should have said something like that. Like why am I doing this- because you people are a mess, and I'm the one sent to clean you up. That would have made sense. But he doesn't say this. The leaders ask him what he's doing, and he says- "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

Destroy the temple? Raise it up? It makes absolutely no sense. The temple leaders look at each other and smirk- like anyone could do in three days what it's taken them years to do. And the disciples are beginning to worry he's spent too much time out in the sun and is getting a couple camel burgers short of a happy meal. No one understands him- not at first. We know because the leaders think he's talking about the literal temple. And we know the disciples don't understand because the Gospel says at the end that it was only after his death that the disciples were able to think back to this moment, and remember what he said, and realize what he was talking about.

But they didn't understand what he was saying at the time- they didn't understand a word he was saying at the time. But it's not because the disciples were slow. It's because this is just the way life is. Sometimes the most important events, the most important people in our lives- we just don't understand them at first. Life must be understood backwards- but we have to live it forwards. And sometimes the moments we experience, the people we love- it takes us time- sometimes a lifetime to understand them.

Last week I shared with you that my uncle died. My Uncle Ken was my mom's middle brother. He was kind of a strange bird, to be perfectly honest. He was a physicist and lived alone his whole life. And sometimes when a person lives alone some of the rough edges that get smoothed off by just being around other people- well they just don't get smoothed off. He was very quiet around us and was kind of hard to draw out. My best memories of him were when I was a kid- he was very good with little people, very gentle. He would often bring his telescope to my grandmothers and set it up and show me the moon and different stars. And he had this camera when I was a kid- it had this wooden handle, I just thought it was fascinating, and even though it was an extremely expensive, professional camera, he would let me hold it.

But I have to admit I did not always feel very close to him as I got older. He was hard to talk to. He didn't share very much about the work that he did, or anyone that he knew. And I admit that my family, ok my brother and I mainly- we kind of gently made fun of him sometimes, of his strange mannerisms, not to be mean, but almost like we were trying to understand him better, I think.

I was surprised how hard it was when I called him a few days before he died. He had liver cancer and was very tired when we talked- I could barely understand him, but there was enough of him there that I could tell it was him. I just wasn't ready for him to be so weak.

I was even more surprised this week when my mom sent me a link to his obituary. The newspaper set up an online legacy page where folks can sign in and send their condolences. I was floored not only at the number of people who wrote in, but the things they wrote- the ways in which this man touched their lives. One of my favorites was from a young woman who was dragged along to an annual company picnic where Ken, this person I always thought to be socially awkward and kind of aloof, made her to feel a little more welcome. She wrote: "I met Ken through my late father, and when my mom told me of his passing, I was deeply saddened. I always enjoyed seeing him at the company picnics. He was always the one that made me feel comfortable by being so easy to talk to. He also took some wonderful pictures of my parents and I when I was a toddler. He was a beautiful photographer. I'm very sorry for your loss. He will be greatly missed."

And there were dozens more, very much like it. You know I think of myself as pretty good at reading people- at understanding them. And I thought I had my uncle pretty well figured out. But it turns out that I didn't really understand him at all. He was shy, but he wasn't socially awkward. And he lived alone- but he wasn't lonely. He had a rich life, full of interesting people. And I just didn't know anything about it.

We live our lives going forward- but we only understand them backwards.

Today, take a moment to think about the things and the people in your life that annoy you or that you don't think that highly of even if it's only in your own mind. Take a moment and ask yourself if you really understand everything there is to know about that person- or if maybe there is more going on that you might not see. Don't get me wrong- I don't think this will make us magically like people who get on our nerves. But I do know if we aren't able to see at least something of Christ in them, at least a glimmer- than we aren't really seeing them, not really.

And just on a personal note, this is just anecdotal, but we all seem to be kind of on edge right now. I've seen a couple of moments in the life of the church in the past few months where we've been short with each other, impatient. Things that even a year ago, I'm not sure would have been such a big deal. Folks with so much bad news in the paper and on TV- I think it affects us. I do. So I think right now it's especially important to give each other a little bit of room, a little bit of understanding.

And I say this not just because of how it will effect those around us- but it might just be helpful for ourselves, too. This is something one man found out the hard way, a man who crossed another musician, a musician named Guiseppe Verdi.

Like Stravinsky Verdi revolutionized the musical world as well- only in his case it was by creating opera that was both beautiful and at the same time was realistic- allowing people to have a glimpse at the inner thoughts and emotional lives of the characters on stage. And, like Stravinsky, this wasn't everyone's cup of tea. See, this one man was so upset after traveling to see Verdi's Opera Aida, that he sent Verdi a letter telling him

what a disappointment the performance was with an itemized list of the expenses, saying the least Verdi could do after such a terrible opera was reimburse the man for his expenses. Well, Verdi was a national hero in Italy at this point, but he wasn't above receiving a little pointed criticism like this. He responded to the man with a check for the balance and a note telling him how sorry he was he didn't enjoy himself. And then, Verdi promptly published the man's letter to him in every newspaper across the country- and Italians being as rabid about opera as the French were about ballet, the poor critic couldn't leave his home until he apologized took everything he said back.

So, if you can't bring yourself to respect the mystery of another person, of how they think, or what they create, especially if you don't feel like you are understanding it, if you can't do it for them- consider doing it for yourself. **Amen.**