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Are We There Yet?
Beauty and the Beast

Psalm 22:23-31
John 15:1-17

Once upon a time, there lived a boy named Iggy. Iggy loved reading books about knights and princesses, battles and castles, dragons and treasure. His heroes were knights and warriors who lived by a code and fought for justice and honor. He would often dream about fighting in epic battles and saving the day. And sooner than later his dream came true, and he became a soldier in the Spanish army when he was still in his teens.

His life was full of adventure and excitement. He spent a lot of time in the palaces of dukes and princes. He was strong and full of life. He spent his spare time doing things that weren't exactly admirable. He used his time and his talents for his own glory and pleasure and not much else.

Iggy had been living this way for a long time when one spring day he found himself in a frightening position. He was fighting with an army of fellow Spaniards, and they were in a battle with the French. The French had taken all the land around the Spaniards except for one little spot. Iggy and another soldier held on to that bit of land, which was high on a hill, inside a fort. Everyone else wanted to surrender because there was really no chance that they could win.

Iggy stood before the troops. He called out to his friends in a clear, strong voice. They couldn't surrender! They had the protection of the fort, and they had weapons. Why should they give up?

So, the troops listened to Iggy and continued fighting against the French. But it didn't work. They lost, and Iggy was shot.

In those days, guns didn't shoot little bullets, which are bad enough. These guns shot big, round pellets that were sometimes the size of small rocks, almost like small cannonballs. That's what blasted through Iggy's hip and went straight through his leg and down to his other knee. This was a very serious injury.

But, as always, Iggy was brave. He was strong on the painful journey back to his home, even as he was carried over rough roads, his shattered leg bumping harshly with every step. He was strong when doctors discovered that his leg had been set incorrectly and told him that unless his leg was rebroken and reset, he would never walk again.

When Iggy's leg finally started to heal properly, he discovered two things. One of his bones was still sticking out, forming an ugly bump under his knee. And the leg that had been broken was now shorter than the other one.

So, Iggy decided he would be strong again. He insisted that the doctors saw off that ugly bump under his knee. He chained a cannonball to his short leg and spent hours each day letting it hang free, hoping the ball would stretch the leg back out to its normal size.

Back in those days, there weren't many ways to relieve pain. So, this "therapy" Iggy put himself through was probably incredibly painful and tiring. But Iggy was a strong man.

Because he had spent all those months in his sickbed, Iggy got bored. He asked for something to read. He was hoping for adventure books, tales that he read as a child: knights fighting for the hands of beautiful ladies, traveling to distant lands, and battling strange creatures. Something not only to help past the time but also boost his morale.

But we'll check back on Iggy in a bit.

But first a word from our sponsor, God.

Our second reading is from the Gospel of John 15:1-17

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The stories of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

Bonjour! And welcome back to the Second Sunday in Lent as we reveal your next favorite Disney movie. Ready, drumroll please.

Beauty and the Beast!

Beauty and the Beast is a classic movie and a part of what some claim as the Disney Renaissance which started with the Little Mermaid and ends with Tarzan. So, this includes Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, The Lion King, Mulan some absolute classics that I grew up with.

Anyway, back to Beauty and the Beast. In it we have Belle who is a lot like Iggy. She reads books and dreams about adventure and romance. And in a way we are all a little like Belle and Iggy. Or at least we were like them. Or as Carrie said, "We all start out like Belle...but eventually we become the woman just asking for eggs and the man saying that it's too expensive."

CLIP

Again, Belle "wants more than this provincial life." And she soon discovers it.

In our gospel reading, we hear about vines and branches. We hear about abiding. And we hear about no greater love than lying down your life for another. It brings to mind that great stories of valor and sacrifice and heroes.

I think that a lot of us think that we are ready, willing, and able to lay down our lives for our friends or family. There might even be a small part of us that hopes for a day to demonstrate it. And yet, we can't forgive a friend for something they said 10 years ago. We are rude to our waitress or Uber Eats driver. We think terrible and horrible things about people because someone else online said we should. We think we can lay down our lives for another but we aren't even willing to lay down or sacrifice a little of our own comfort for the benefit of another.

The big grandiose acts are impressive, but they require only one decision. Writing a large check to an organization is great but what about helping on a regular basis? Having an elaborate proposal or impressive wedding is great, but what about the daily decisions to love? Spending a week on a mission trip is great, but what about the choice to love God and love neighbor when we're home?

Laying down one's life for another is an amazing act, dying for something is a brave act but living for something is harder. Abiding in God and God abiding in you. That's a daily grind. That's making a set decision every day.

But it is those little choices that change us, that changes others.

We even see this in Beauty and the Beast it's the little decisions to give someone the benefit of the doubt, to meet them halfway, to listen to each other.

CLIP

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

When we think about bearing fruit; we think about the little things. We have to think about the soil and nutrients. Of course, water is going to play a large part of it. We have to keep our eyes out for pests and blight. We need to remember to prune.

Now pruning is something that's very important. Because to be able to bear good fruit, to bear more fruit, we don't want the plant too much energy on producing leaves instead of fruit. Sure, the leaves make the plant look big and full and even healthy, but that doesn't mean the fruit is good. Basically, that is exactly what Gaston is.

CLIP

Gaston looks good, he's strong, he's willing to make a big grandiose move by proposing to Belle with the entire wedding outside Belle's front door. He takes the bold move to send Belle's father to an asylum. Or to rally the villagers to attack the Beast! Everything about Gaston is a big grandiose action, but there is no weight behind it, there is no fruit.

Iggy who had dreams to be a hero had abused his position for his own renown and benefit. He was all about himself and his own glory. He was a lot of leaves but no fruit. After his injury Iggy was left with nothing to do for a while but to sit and read. But the books he received were not what he was hoping for. Instead, Iggy was handed a Bible and a book about the saints.

Ignatius read these books. He thought about them. He was struck by the great sacrifices that the saints had made for God. He was overwhelmed by their love of Jesus.

And Ignatius thought, "Why am I using my life just for myself? These people did so much good during their time on earth. Why can't I?"

Ignatius decided that he would use the talents God had given him—his strength, his leadership ability, his bravery, and his intelligence—to serve God and God's people.

While Ignatius continued to heal, he started praying very seriously. God's peace filled his heart and assured him that he was on the right path.

When Ignatius was all healed and ready to walk and travel again, he left his home to prepare for his new life. It wasn't easy. He was 30, which was considered old in those days, and he was getting a late start in his studies for the priesthood. In those days, the Mass was said only in Latin, and Latin was the language all educated people used to communicate with each other. Ignatius didn't know a bit of Latin. So for his first Latin lessons, big, rough Ignatius had to sit in a classroom with a bunch of 10-year-old boys who were learning Latin for the first time too!

That takes a different kind of strength, doesn't it?

Ignatius continued to travel. He gathered nine friends who felt the same way he did, and together they made a promise to God. They were the founders of the Company of Jesus, also called the Jesuits.

What started with Ignatius and his nine friends grew over just a few years into a group of priests and brothers that had more than a thousand members. They used their talents to teach and preach about Jesus all over the world.

And to think it all began because one man—St. Ignatius of Loyola—was strong and brave enough to change! He made a decision that he continually had to make. He chose to abide in God and bear much fruit.

The Beast through all the small acts and choices began to know what love is. And was able to sacrifice himself and let Belle go.

It is these small intentional choices to be kind, to show grace, and to forgive that prepares us for the harder choices. It is training. When we watch musicians or athletes, we forget the amount of work and training was necessary for them to get to that level. We don't see the 5am trips to the gym or repeating the same 4 measures over and over and over again to get it just right. And that's the same with bearing fruit and laying down our lives. It takes time. It takes practice. It takes abiding. It takes us trusting and hoping in our Lord that the ending is a happy one.

Tale as old as time,
Tune as old as song,
Bitter-sweet and strange
Finding you can change
Learning you were wrong.

Our story isn't over yet. The pages are blank. What story are you writing with your life?

What will you choose?
What will you prune?
What story will you write?

CLIP