

St. Luke's Episcopal Church
Proper 17, Year B — August 30, 2009
Song of Song 2: 8-13; James 1: 17-27; Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23
Homily preached by Ernest Boyer, Th.D.

A Life Second to None

Reading today's gospel I thought immediately of a man none of you has ever heard of. Normally I would never identify him by name, but in this one instance I will. His name is John Sullivan. I feel called to identify him, because I was with John when he died, and I strongly suspect that no one else now living even knows that he ever existed. I want to tell you about John. I also want to tell you about how I came to be with him when he died and why I alone in all the world am now left to remember him.

Before I do, though, I need to explain how all this relates to today's Gospel.

“It is from *within*, from the human heart, that evil intentions come,” Jesus says in today's reading from Mark. At its core, this is a claim that if we're going to explain the very worst of the ills that plague humanity it's not *outside* ourselves that we have to look, but inside. To understand our troubles we need to peer into the human heart. The context of this statement was one of Jesus' many disputes with the religious authorities of his time. As was so often the case, the subject of that quarrel was what they considered to be Jesus' lax application of the traditional purity laws. It was this conflict that explains why Jesus phrased his statement the way he did — negatively. Jesus was saying that when it comes to evil, laws alone can't reach the source of the problem. They don't change the heart. And it's because of what's in our hearts that we cause pain to others and to ourselves.

The thing is, this idea also has a positive parallel. If the human heart is the source of vindictive and selfish intentions, after all, it must also be the source of benevolent and loving ones too.... That, at least, was my Grandmother's view. This idea formed the very core of her life. I can't tell you how often I heard it: “It's not what happens to you that's important in life,” she'd say. “It's how you react to it. It's what's in your heart. Life is what you make of it. You got that, Ernie?”

“Yes, Grandma,” I'd say. “I got it.”

I wonder if I really did, though.

That's because she never really explained how this actually worked. As a devout Christian, I suppose she felt she didn't have to. The problem is, where the evil in the human heart always seems so close to the surface, the good that is also there can seem much, *much* harder to reach. The evil always seems to be *right there*. It's all too ready to transform our lives for the worse. But how do we get access to the goodness that is also in our hearts? How do we draw forth those benevolent and loving intentions that can transform our lives with equal or even greater power, but this time for the better?

It was while reflecting on this that I suddenly remembered John Sullivan.

John's life is a story of one loss after another. Born in Cambridge, MA in 1910, John was seven when his father was killed in WWI. He was eight when his mother died a year later in the Flu epidemic of 1918. Without anywhere else to turn, John and an older brother fended for

themselves for a while until his brother decided to strike out on his own and leave John, still only ten, behind. Now completely on his own, John lived — in the current phrase — on the street. Somehow he managed to keep more or less clear of crime, and by his early twenties he had found enough steady work to allow him to marry a girl who he adored. They had a daughter together, but when his wife learned that John had been diagnosed with a degenerative eye disease that would eventually leave him completely blind, she packed up her things and left, abandoning both him and their child. In time John found a job with the American Association for the Blind so that he remained able to work even after his blindness became complete. He even found ways to pay for his daughter's medical bills after she was diagnosed with cancer several years later. She died in her late twenties.

I first met John when he was admitted to the hospital where I worked then as Chaplain. He was in his late seventies at that point, and so frail that the first time I walked into his hospital room I didn't even realize that his bed was occupied. He lay completely motionless, staring into the distance. For a moment I wasn't even sure that he was alive.

I glanced at the name on his chart. "John?" I asked tentatively.

Hearing his name he shifted his head to stare in my general direction. It was only then that I realized that he was blind.

"Yes?" he asked. His voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"I'm the Chaplain here, John." I said. "I just stopped in to see how you're doing."

Hearing my voice a second time, he adjusted his gaze as if he was trying to find me in the darkness.

"How I'm doing?" he echoed. He chuckled lightly as he said this and suddenly all weakness seemed to vanish from his voice. "Oh I'm great!" he said. "Just great! No complaints at all. I am blessed. I am so very blessed. I've had a life second to none."

"A life second to none" — that's actually what he said, and it was John through-and-through. If ever there was a person who had reason to complain, reason to feel that life had somehow shortchanged him, it was John. And yet in all the months I knew him — and over the course of countless conversations — I never once heard him express the least bitterness, the least self-pity. Even about his most painful moments he found small things to be grateful for.

About his older brother, for example, he said: "Oh I worshiped my brother. I knew that as long as he was around I'd be OK."

"And how was it for you when he left, John?" I asked.

"Oh, I was pretty sad," he said, "but I later realized that he probably thought I'd hold him back. And I would've too. A little kid like that. I hope he did OK."

About the wife who left him, John said: "She gave me a reason to get off the street and find a way to support a family. I loved her so much, but you know, living with a blind man, it would've been hard for her. She wasn't that kind of person."

About his daughter he said: "We were so close. She brought me such joy. It broke my heart when she died. There isn't a day that does by that I don't miss her, but the older I get the more I sense that I'm going to see her again soon. I'm looking forward to that."

For months on end John and I talked nearly every day. His attitude never changed. I found it so extraordinary — so puzzling even — that from a life so filled with ashes John always seemed able to pull out some small gem to cherish. There was nothing artificial or saccharine about it either. John never pretended that there hadn't been profound pain in his life. He acknowledged it openly. And yet that never seemed to alter his unwavering sense of gratitude.

I just couldn't see how he managed it.

Very early on I realized that he and I had reversed roles. I was the Chaplain, but *I* was going to *him* to try to understand how he did it. Life may be, as my grandmother said, what you make it, and may be it really *is* what's in your heart that counts, not what happens to you, but how did John find in *his* heart the ability to approach with such *reverence* a life as hard as his? Again and again I found myself looking for the words to ask him this. I never quite seemed able to get the question right, though, because instead of answering, John always seemed to change the subject. He'd always start talking about his beloved guide dog of many years, a dog he named Runner.

"Why'd you call him Runner?" I asked the first time John told me about his dog.

"I called him that because that dog just *loved* to run," John said. "He and I went running every day. We started out going just a few blocks... then a few more... then a few more. Eventually we were running 5 to 8 miles a night. We'd run through Cambridge then over the bridge to Boston and back. We always ran about midnight or one in the morning."

"You'd run through the city *at night*?" I asked.

John shrugged. "Night or day, it's all the same to me. Fewer cars at night."

"But running like that and not able to see — how'd you do it? I mean, weren't you ever scared?"

"Scared?" The question seemed to puzzle him. "No, I was never scared. I had Runner with me. I had God with me. Whatever happened, I knew I had what I needed.

By then I had already noticed that John never seemed to have any other visitors. Of course, I knew that he had no living family, but still I wondered about this. Then one day I entered John's hospital room just as another man was leaving. The man introduced himself as a friend of John's then motioned for me to follow him out into the hallway.

"I just want to make sure you know that that guy in there is someone special," he said once we were alone. "He ever tell you about his dog and the way the two of them would run at night?"

I nodded.

"Man, they were something," he said. "Once I happened to pass them in my car. There they were, John and that dog — John holding onto the dog's guide bar. They were running fast. And I mean *fast*. Except for the dog, you'd never guess that John was blind. This was on city streets and it was well past midnight. John and that dog would jump up one curb then down the next like they were one. Then they'd sprint down the sidewalk, pounding pavement like they were in the Olympics. I followed them for a couple of miles. I'd never seen anything like it. And him completely blind! Amazing! Did he tell you about his life?"

"Yeah," I said. "Much of it anyway."

"Can you believe all the things that poor guy has had to go through? And you know what he says? 'I've had a life second to none.' He ever say that to you? Can you believe that? The first time I heard him say it, I thought: 'How pompous!' But, see, that was before I knew him. Then I began to hear a little of what he's gone through. Now when he says that stuff about a life second to none, I think: 'This may be the most courageous man I've ever met.'"

"Yeah," I said. "I've come to the same conclusion,"

"OK," the man said, "here's something I'm sure he's never told you. I bet he's never told you about all the people he's helped. He's too modest. If you know his life, you know that he's been abandoned again and again. Everyone close to him has either died or left him, but the fact is, he himself never lets *anybody* down. You probably know that for decades he worked for the American Association for the Blind. What I'm sure you *don't* know is that while he was

there he made it a personal goal that no one else would ever be without support the way he so often was. That's how I know him. During much of that time I worked for the Department of Social Services. I was one of the people he'd badger to get help if someone needed it. The thing is, he did most of this completely behind the scenes. Over the years he's probably helped thousands and thousands. Most never even knew it. I thought *you* should know, though. The guy in that hospital bed is pretty special. So you take care of him, OK?"

It was about three weeks later that I got a call from the head nurse on John's floor to say that John was dying. I went to his room, pulled up a chair, and took his hand. His breathing was irregular and labored.

"God is with you, John," I said.

He gave a small nod. "I know," he said. Several moments later he gave my hand a light squeeze and added softly, "second... to... none."

Amazing. Amazing....

After that he tried several more times to speak. By then his words had become to faint, though. In the hours that followed I sat with him as his breathing grew slower and slower until eventually I couldn't tell whether he was breathing at all. Then all at once he seemed to relax, and I watched as the color drained from his face. At that point I said a final prayer then carefully laid the hand I had been holding down beside him. My single regret was that in all this time he still had never told me how he did it, how he had managed to turn a life of such hardship and loss into one of such gratitude and service to others.

Only much later did I realize that he *had* told me. He had been telling me all along. The key to everything lay in those long runs of his, the runs he took with his guide dog through the city at night. That was the answer, because — you know — we're *all* running blind. We're *all* running in the dark. It doesn't matter how powerful we *seem* or how powerless we *are*. It doesn't matter how rich we are, how educated, how sophisticated or how clearly we seem to see — we're all running blind. In every way the matters most it is not we who are in control. It's God. That's true of all of us. What made John special was that he fully accepted this in a way that allowed him simply to let go, trust in God...and enjoy the run. *That* I realized was the key to the gratitude that John was able to bring to life. It was also the key to the goodness that he always managed to find both in himself and in others.

For years and years now, I alone have known John's story. It's the story of a man who was blind but who used his blindness to teach him something few of us ever learn. Even after all these years it's that something I'm still struggling to learn. It's the story of a man who discovered that if there is evil in the human heart, there is also good, and the key to that goodness is trust — trust in the goodness of God, trust in the goodness of each other. It is in *this* way that we find the goodness in ourselves too.

That's John's story, the story of a life second to none. Now it's *our* story too.