

For this month's update, I feel compelled to tell you a story. I must write. Such occurrences demand permanence.

Today, I witnessed snippets from two radically different worlds that, when juxtaposed, created a scene that moved me deep within and will remain with me for a lifetime. My heart is breaking; I cannot stop weeping.

The day began as any ordinary Sunday. I entered bus 9711 and made the hour long trek to church, taking the time to write a birthday card, read, and be alone with my thoughts while staring blankly out the window at the by now very familiar sights of the overpopulated city. The church service, too, began with the regular collection of worship songs followed by the sermon. Though I have yet to meet my pastor in person, I have come to greatly respect him as a humble, real man who faithfully proclaims God's Word. Through his simple, yet insightful and convicting sermons, I come to know God on a deeper level, and thereby, to love Him more. Before he could begin yet another sermon, however, the pastor announced that a friend of his (I believe this friend also had some leadership role in the church) passed away after battling cancer for three years, leaving a wife and two children behind. The church had been praying and fasting on his behalf and the pastor shared that he truly believed God was going to heal him. The pastor began giving the details, telling us of the pain of the wife and children and his own struggle since it happened, but quickly stopped, as he was overcome with emotion. Silence reigned in the sanctuary for several long minutes before he could trust himself to speak. He was not expecting such a reaction within himself and strained to regain composure. The rest of the sermon was punctuated by like occurrences, as he simply could not continue. Several times he was forced to put his head in his hands on the podium and weep. He was weeping not just for himself, but for the wife and children who are experiencing untold grief. It was also apparent from his words that he was having a struggle within himself over God's sovereignty - struggling to trust Him when there is no understanding, no knowledge, no easily discernable reasons. He could have stepped off the stage, sought a private room, dismissed the service. Instead, he stayed there, and wept in front of his congregation. He was willing to be humble, to show his emotion, to be vulnerable, to admit, even as a pastor, that he does not have all the answers, that even he experiences confusion and bewilderment and seasons when it is a struggle to trust and praise God. It reminds me of one of the convicting songs by Casting Crowns, part of which goes as follows: "Are we happy plastic people, under shining plastic steeples, with walls around our weakness, and smiles to hide our pain? But the invitation's open to every heart that has been broken; maybe then we close the curtain on the stained glass masquerade." I think appropriate, balanced, God-honoring vulnerability is sorely lacking in today's Christian community. I think Jesus certainly provided a model of this. Also, do we fully understand what it means to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep? I know I do not. How many of us actually do that, especially the latter one? I saw all this powerfully lived out on the stage of my church, through a man who truly pursues God. Oh, he preached a sermon that day, one that had nothing to do with his actual text.

So church ended, I think all of us feeling rather moved by what happened, and I proceeded on to one of the nearby army bases to pick something up from one of my friends. I cannot say I like going there, for several reasons; though I have only recently been able to articulate this, I sense such an unhealthy, unsettled atmosphere as soon as I arrive. A few days ago, one of my army friends informed me that his roommate's mother committed suicide. Before that, it was the chaplain's assistant. When I arrived today, I heard a similar story. This time, it was a young man who had only been on base a month. Apparently, he was having issues with a woman back home; he also left a four year old son behind. While I was there, the men were gathering for a briefing on the suicide. My friend was on duty at

battalion headquarters, so I sat with him and a sergeant also on duty. While my friend and I tried to watch Band of Brothers, the sergeant rattled on about the suicide. I was shocked at the heartlessness of his words. The conversation was sprinkled with the following comments: "So, what did they do with the body," my friend asked. "How the blank should I know," the sergeant replied, "Threw it out the window?" The sergeant went on to say, "You know, I believe in population control. If the worthless ones want to kill themselves off, I am all for it; I will help them do it. Just whatever you do, do not do it on my four day weekend. Have a little consideration!" I was relieved when he finally stopped talking. My friend said later that he does not really mean it – this is just his way of joking – but I reminded him that out of the heart the mouth speaks. This was no time for such joking.

I left that friend (and the sergeant) and met another army friend for lunch. I shared what the sergeant had said, hoping this friend would have a more compassionate viewpoint. His perspective was only slightly better. In so many words, he said, "Since I believe in Darwinism, it is natural that the bad genes will eradicate themselves. I feel bad only because he was a fellow soldier, and he will no longer be able to take care of his family." As I questioned him further, I discovered that if he did not know the person who committed suicide, he would not care about it at all. "The only worth we have," he went on, "is the worth our family places on us." As I brought a spiritual dimension into the conversation, he, as usual, slowly shifted the conversation to other things and felt it necessary to elaborate on his view of family. His notion of an ideal family involves about four men and four women living together in a community, the men sharing the women, and everyone sharing the children – oh, and the cats! At this point, my food no longer looked quite so appetizing; I felt sick... But, to return to the suicide. I sensed so little heart on base for what the family of the deceased man might be going through. Instead, the information was thrown around like the score of a football game, and the general attitude was annoyance over the interruption of their weekend and the possibility that next week they would be forced to attend another stupid suicide prevention class. I am fully aware that men do not process things the same way as women, and further, since I am not in the Army, I do not understand the dynamics of everything that occurs. I am also sure some of the men on that base do not fit into this generalization. Especially with the increasing frequency of military suicides, I understand how they could, in a sense, take on a routine, annoying aspect. Each of these people were created in the image of God; their deaths terminated lives that could have had great potential. I wanted to believe that the men felt something on a deeper level, but I suppose to show anything would not have coincided with their egotistical, skewed sense of masculinity. I was just struck by the flippancy with which the whole thing was discussed.

Sadness and unsettledness nagged at my spirit as I rode the subway home. The full effect did not hit me though, until I arrived home. And then the wave hit, in a torrent of tears that would not cease. My heart broke and I cried out to God and wept for the roommate who, at such a young age has been divorced, has lost a mother to suicide, and has numerous other issues, for the four year old boy who has already experienced so much tragedy, for the men on base who have such twisted views and need God so desperately, for the wife and children of my pastor's friend, for the multitude of families I know of right now who have lost loved ones, for the hurt and pain that surrounds me, for the hopelessness that is the logical end of a consistent worldview that denies God. My own finitude only caused the sobs to increase, for I am so helpless to remedy anything. Yet, in reading Spurgeon this morning, the following ushered encouragement into my heart: "When you weep, do not think that God does not see your tears, for 'like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him' (Ps. 103:13). Your sigh is able to move the heart of Jehovah; your whisper can incline His ear unto you; your prayer can stay His hand; your faith can move His arm. Do not think that God sits on high paying no attention to you. Remember that however poor and needy you are, the Lord thinks about you. 'For the eyes of the

Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him' (2 Chron. 16:9). Oh, then, repeat the truth that never tires: No God is like the God my soul desires. He, at whose voice heaven trembles, even He, great as He is, knows how to stoop to me." Yes, even through our tears, God is at work. Change my heart, oh God, so that it weeps for the things that break Your heart, and not for selfish things.

I know this is long and complex, but I am coming to realize that attempting, however poorly, to capture truth in writing, is part of my calling, and write I must. Whether it is part of your calling to read is up to you 😊 I could elaborate further on the lessons and truths and impressions I gleaned from this day, but I think I will leave you to your own musings. Such weighty matters deserve to sit in the soul for a time, mine included. So, ponder well and consider...

I love you all!

Charity

"The only ultimate love is the sacrificial act of God saving me to share God's passion for the supremacy of God. Nothing glorifies him, or satisfies us, more." John Piper