

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

When I was in third grade, my mother told me the following story as an event that actually took place. And I have found myself musing about it from time to time ever since.

Many years ago, the King of Greece was en route to the United States for a conference with our President. Among the King's attendants was a man who owned a big, beautiful mastiff, a dog which he prized greatly.

One day aboard ship, as the dog was racing playfully, he slipped on the smooth deck and went overboard. The attendant rushed to the bridge to tell the captain, in hopes that he might stop the ship and recover the dog. But the captain assured the man that the dog was doubtless already dead from the ship's propellers, and that, in any case, he could not possibly stop an entire ocean liner, adding great expense and interrupting the King's schedule, just to save the life of one dog.

In the midst of the captain's long and very rational explanation, the attendant dashed from the bridge and dove overboard. Well, "Dog overboard!" had not been enough to stop the ship, but "Man overboard!" was. So they stopped the ship, picked up the attendant *and* his dog, and went on with their journey.

Now, I realize that you see the point, and that such a story is better used to illustrate and inspire the *end* of a sermon rather than to be its beginning. But I want to skip the inspiration today and see if this story can illuminate for us some of the principles of salvation. The story is too small for the task, and there is only one story which is not. But perhaps this cut-down version will give us new eyes and ears for the real story.

What was the dog's life worth? Innately, and by his own existence, the dog was worth the value of one dog. Even though this dog was a special breed and a magnificent specimen of his particular breed, in this instance the stakes were too high for a mere dog, no matter how special. Clearly the dog's own worth was not enough to save him. Unfortunate, regrettable, sad – but the dog's value was not enough to stop the ship, and so the dog lost even that value which he *did* have. In this moment of crisis, his value was not enough, and so he was suddenly without any value. It was negated. He was lost.

But unknown to the captain, unknown to the crew, unknown to the passengers and to the King of Greece, this dog was not worth the value of one dog. This dog happened to be quite literally equal in value to the worth of one man. Why? Because a man loved him! The dog had nothing whatsoever to say about it. He could not have produced this extra value. He could not earn it or cancel it. Nor could he fully comprehend its power. But a man's life was on the line for this dog, so this dog was equal in value to the worth of one man.

Let us suppose that the dog had the powers of reason and reflection. What would he be thinking as he swam in the cold water with the ship moving off in the distance? He would know that his own life was small compared to the fortunes of an entire ocean liner. He would know that his fate was to struggle for a time and then to die. But what would be his thoughts regarding his Lord and Master?

Well, if he were like many modern Christians, he would know that his Master loved him, after a fashion. There would be poignant thoughts of how he would be missed and how his death would be mourned. Perhaps he would even envision his Master pleading with the captain on his behalf. And perhaps, finally, in the distance, his Master would come to the back rail of the ship and wave, tears flowing down his face, and the cry would come drifting across the water: "I tried to stop the ship but they wouldn't listen to me! I love you."

That would be the expectation and that would be the end of it, because that is what most people think love means. The church, for the most part – by its brand of charity – has been teaching people that this is what love means. But it is not what *Christianity* means by love. That is ever our misunderstanding. We think love means a lot of sentiment. And when we feel lots of sentiment, we think that means we are loving. But Christianity is about a love that dives overboard to share the fate of the loved one. In Christian language: When you are loved, you always bear the total value of Him who loves you – and always and only *because* He loves you. In Christian language: When you love another, it means that whatever value is in you will operate for them. The world cannot cast *them* off unless it is willing to cast *you* off as well. (Which, of course, sometimes it may be.)

Perhaps we cannot honestly claim to love very many people that much – enough to dive in with them should the world try to move on without them. But then, in Christian language, that simply means we do not love very many people, period. We know that *real* love means

this much because God's Messiah was unwilling to let the Kingdom of Heaven move on without us. It is our belief, at least, that God in Christ Jesus dove into the world by reason of His love for us, and that without His value on the line for us in this way, the Ship of Heaven – the Kingdom of God – would not be coming back for the likes of us.

At its apex, that is the meaning and message of the Gospel. The love of God always seemed like a theory or a sentiment – until One came who jumped in with us to share our fate. After that, it became clear that the universe itself must deal with us according to the value of the Son of God, regardless of what our own innate value might be. The universe cannot move on without us, unless it is willing to move on without Him. We have His value because He loves us – and always and only *because* He loves us.

That is the thing we are always forgetting, if ever we can believe it in the first place. Your value is not worth one human being. Your life is equal in value to the worth of the Christ of God! He will not accept resurrection unless it is extended also to you. Ultimately, that is what the Cross is about – that is what it means.

Now I want to stretch our story a little further. We have our dog back onboard ship. The Master reassures him, telling him that he need not fear, that his being saved was no accident, that he can depend upon and believe in this love which has saved him. Moreover (and here is the stretching), the Master makes it clear that he loves all dogs in this same way. He loves all dogs this much! Of course, most of them have no knowledge or experience of it yet.

So what happens next? Well, possibly the dog goes prancing around the decks with his nose so high in the air that he trips over ropes, bumps into doors, and gets in everybody's way. And perhaps he spends most of his time bragging to other dogs about how great he is and how they stopped an entire ocean liner just to save him.

This is not the recommended procedure, of course, but it happens often enough to give many people the impression that this is the basic meaning of Christian salvation – the inevitable attitude of those who believe in Jesus Christ.

There is another possibility, however. The Life of the church can be seen as a series of smaller pictures intended to enhance and keep clear the larger picture, until more and more people come to see and understand and *believe* that they also are loved by God. Actually, it is

part of the miracle – that we are invited to participate in the salvation story. But there is this prerequisite: You have to know the larger picture *personally* before you can consciously participate in the little pictures that connect with and reveal it. The old phrase was: “If you do not have it, you cannot give it away.”

So now our dog is back on deck after his own ordeal and salvation. Since we have given him the powers of reason and reflection, it is fair to say that if he has any understanding or soul at all, he is going to feel a profound thankfulness and a greatly increased affection for his Master. But that is not all. There would also be a nearly bewildered feeling of awe and amazement that the Master loved him so much. At the same time, I suspect he would feel terribly chagrined and embarrassed to realize all the trouble and risk he had caused for his Master by his carelessness. And he would promise himself a hundred times over that he would never be the cause of such trouble and danger for his Master ever again.

That's *our* problem, is it not? We do not walk around with our noses in the air. We walk around determined never to cause Jesus any more trouble. We do not realize at first that this is just as ludicrous a response to the Cross as sticking our noses in the air.

In any case, the whole experience might create a very cautious, careful, highly conscientious, and rather rigid lifestyle. I think this would make the Master very sad. That is, if the awareness of saving grace merely serves to destroy the joy that was between this dog and his Master before, this would be a great sadness. No more romping and playing onboard ship; everything forbidden; everything somber and serious and crucial and cautious – sort of like some Christians. What could the Master possibly do with an attitude like *that*?

I suppose the Master would understand, pet the dog, and try to reassure him back into joy and playfulness. And the dog would feel secure in this attention, but he would stay determined to prove his gratitude and worth by never giving the Master cause for a moment's concern or worry ever again.

And that is how it came to pass that Christian love died in the church. We decided to be *good* instead of *loving*. After that, the story never seemed very real, and it lost its impact on coming generations. Most of the lost world stayed lost. And even those who knew about the Master's love began to speak of it as only a story to illustrate some

spiritual truth – a metaphor – but having nothing to do with the real world. In time most dogs came to believe that the story had never *really* happened in the first place; even those who did believe it thought it was only something that had happened far away and long ago. And some said it was just a ruse to help those in the Dog Kingdom believe that their lives had some importance to someone somewhere, and to help them to be careful and to teach them to be good. All the puppies heard the story at least once a year and got some extra bones to help them be happy about the wonderful story. But what all the dogs *really believed* was that you should never romp or play onboard ship because you might slip and go overboard.

Perhaps the whole thing could have gone that way. And certainly too much of the real story *did* go that way – but not all of it. So back to our analogy for one last scene.

One day, while he was walking along in his very somber, correct, and most conscientious manner, the mastiff saw a little terrier scampering to get away from a boy who was chasing him with a stick. In his fear and flight, the little terrier slipped on the smooth deck, and out into the cold waters he went. The boy looked around quickly and, seeing that no one was watching, ran away.

The poor mastiff was in a terrible quandary. He had sworn to himself a thousand times that he would never again cause his Master any trouble. Moreover, his Master was nowhere in sight, nor was he at all sure what the Master would do in this situation, since this terrier did not go to his church. Besides, the boy was chasing him with a stick, so maybe the terrier had been bad and deserved his fate.

So the mastiff ran quickly to the welfare cabin and got a box of kennel rations and threw them over the ship's side so the little terrier would know that somebody cared. And as he threw the package over the side, he barked a cheerful word of encouragement about peace and faith, and he signed the package "Jesus Saves" and "God Is Love," so the little terrier would not feel so lonely.

No – not quite! Not this time. There is no Cross, no Easter, no redemption that way. The mastiff himself had once been over the side and alone in the dark, cold sea. The sight of another in that same plight brought it all back in all its terror and realism, and it flooded through him in an instant, dashing all of the high and careful resolves that he had been reciting to himself. The mastiff gave one thunderous bark and, with a bound, sailed over the rail and out into the sea.

“What are *you* doing here?” was the terrier’s astonished question. “You always walk the decks so carefully and properly, I don’t see how *you* could have slipped.”

“I came to wait with you until the ship comes back to pick us up,” replied the mastiff.

“Don’t be naive,” said the terrier. “No ship is coming back to pick up either one of us.”

“Well, you’re right about that,” agreed the mastiff. “It will not come back for us. But it will come back to pick up my Master.”

“Master?!” said the terrier. “There’s no Master here – just us two drowning dogs!”

“Oh, he’ll be here,” said the mastiff. And a feeling of exhilaration suddenly swept over him, like a great smile of peace. He knew with certainty, at last, that when the Master came, He would be very pleased.

PRAYER

Well Lord, we have not said much about what happens when the water is too cold or how the propellers tend to suck everything in. We have not even mentioned the sharks. But then it is not Easter – not yet for most of us. Teach us of love and salvation anyway. Teach us to want it, to watch for it, to wait for it. Teach us the salvation of Immanuel – the secret of jumping in – that one day we may also come to know the truth of Easter, and of love in all of its fullness.