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FIRE AND FORGET

John 19:1-16

Last Saturday night we were at Dallas-Ft. Worth International Airport to catch a flight home. Our plan was to get the last flight of the day to San Diego which was scheduled to leave a little after 10:30 PM. That meant we would be getting in after midnight, making our night before church very short. As I mentioned last week we got to the airport early enough to have a shot at getting on a flight leaving an hour earlier. They put us on standby for that flight. As we waited to find out if we could get on that flight things began to get interesting. There were a couple of hundred people waiting to get on the plane and the airline had a grand total of one woman there to handle the whole process. As it got closer and closer to departure time it got more and more hectic and way more tense. That poor woman was getting farther and farther behind. There was a line of people on standby. Like us they were waiting to see if they would get on, and then if they did to get a boarding pass from the poor harried woman. But she wasn’t able to deal with us standby folks because so many other problems were cropping up. Shortly before the flight began boarding the screen displayed the names of the standbys who were going on the flight, including ours, but we still had to get boarding passes. But the woman was still trying to deal with other complex problems some passengers had. People started getting a little panicky when boarding started because now the woman was trying to check boarding passes and deal with all the other issues at the same time. They began crowding up toward the desk at the gate where she was working. It felt to me like things were really starting to deteriorate when the crowning blow came. A young woman could no longer take it. She stepped up to the desk and insistently said, “I need your help now! You’ve put my son on that plane without me, and I need you to get me on that plane so I can be with him.”

I don’t understand how that happened. I also don’t know how that all got worked out. I hope it did. Airlines do make mistakes, unfortunately. CNN had a story in December about a woman who lives in Fort Myers, Florida. Her 6 year old grandson was flying alone from Philadelphia to visit her. The airlines are careful about making sure an unaccompanied child is escorted to and from the flight and is taken care of. However, when the woman went to get her grandson, the plane arrived, but he wasn’t on it. His mother had taken him to the airport and put him in care of the airline, but he didn’t make it to Fort Myers. Nana was panicked. She eventually learned that her grandson was fine, but he was in Orlando. Somehow, his escort had put him on the wrong plane and no one caught the mistake. Ironically, I had observed a different boy who was flying unaccompanied on our flight. He had an airline employee sticking right with him, making sure he was safe and got where he needed to be. Wouldn’t it be great there was someone taking care of you and making sure you got where you need to go in life? According to something Jesus said at one of the worst moments of his life, you actually can have that. Let’s look at John 19:1-16.

PILATE FOUND JESUS INNOCENT

This section of the book of John recounts the final trials of Jesus Christ as he stood before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Pilate is kind of the central actor in these verses. We don’t know much about Pilate. He served as the Roman governor of Judea for 10 years from about 26 to 36 A.D. He was likely at least a somewhat capable administrator because he lasted 10 years. However, there were accounts of quite a few problems and tension between him and the local populace, and his rule over the area was ended after he handled a situation in Samaria with brutality. In Medieval times for some reason there was a lot of interest in Pilate and he became the subject of a number of tales. In some branches of the Church there is respect for him, including stories that he and his wife both became believers in Jesus. However, there is no real evidence for this and there is certainly no historical basis for the many wild tales about him that came out of the Middle Ages.

In John 18:38 Pilate had told the mob that was calling for Jesus’ execution, “I find no basis for a charge against him.” He could see that Jesus was not guilty of any offense, and he tried to find a way to release him that would appease the crowd. That attempt failed, and what came next seems more than a little strange and wrong to us. This chapter begins by telling us, “Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged.” You find the man innocent so you have him flogged? For what? Taking up your time? To me, this is definitely not fair, but I believe it was part of another attempt to let Jesus go.

Roman soldiers were not known for their sensitivity. These were hardened men who had undoubtedly had some unpleasant encounters with the local people who all pretty much despised them. There was not a lot of love lost between the local Jewish people and the Roman soldiers who were occupying their nation. We all know that throughout history the Jewish people have suffered terrible persecution all over the world. There was some of that back then, although the Roman legions that occupied many lands were generally pretty tough customers who were equal opportunity enforcers, but the ancient Jews definitely got their share, if not more.

When the soldiers were given the responsibility of flogging this Jewish man who was supposedly a king, they took full advantage of the opportunity to mock and brutalize him. They put a mock crown made out of twigs and thorns on his head. I’m sure that was painful, as the thorns might have dug into his skin, but I don’t think that was the point. It was aimed at being a joke of a crown. The point was mockery not torture. They put a robe on him, likely one of the soldier’s robes. They bowed before him repeatedly saying, “Hail, King of the Jews,” then they’d hit him. The other Gospels tell us they also spit on him.

Once more, according to verse 4, after the beating and mocking was done Pilate went out to the mob and said, “I am bringing him out to you and telling you I find no basis for a charge against him.” When he had Jesus brought out he said, “Behold, the man.” In other words, look at him. He had been beaten and was bloody and bruised. He was no threat to anyone. He has already been punished for whatever you have against him. This is more than sufficient.

It didn’t work. The mob responded, “Crucify! Crucify!” The ones yelling this were, according to verse 6. the chief priests and their officials. The people in Jerusalem at that point would have been a mixed bag. There were many who thought Jesus was awesome. Earlier in the week they had hailed and cheered him when he entered the city. There were many who thought of him negatively because he upset the apple cart of conventional wisdom, and their religious leaders didn’t like him. My guess is the large majority weren’t sure what to think. I’ve heard it said that when something significant happens there are always 3 groups. There are those who make things happen, there are those who watch things happen, and there are those who say, “What happened?” I suspect many, maybe most, were not sure what was going on and what to think. What I know for sure is that the majority of the people were not calling for Jesus’ crucifixion. To them, crucifixion was a brutal symbol of Roman oppression. They didn’t want to see any Jewish person crucified.

Unfortunately, the religious leaders saw Jesus as a threat to them and their position. They had also convinced themselves that he was going to provoke a reaction from the Romans that would devastate their people and their land, and they had to get rid of him for the good of the people. Ironically, about 40 years later, not the followers of Jesus, but the zealots who so hated Rome, did rise up in insurrection against their Roman overlords, and the Romans responded as the leaders feared. They totally destroyed Judea and Israel ceased to exist as a nation for 1900 years.

In exasperation Pilate responded, “You want him crucified? You take him crucify him, because I see no crime in this man worthy of that. He’s innocent.” We know that was his exasperation talking because he knew very well they couldn’t crucify him. If they tried they’d be breaking Roman law and could end up being convicted of murder themselves. They pointed this out to Pilate and told him according to their law Jesus should be executed because of his claim to be the Son of God.

The statement that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God unnerved Pilate for two reasons, one practical and the other superstitious. The practical reason was that the Romans actually did try to enforce local laws. Pilate had the responsibility to maintain civil order by upholding the local laws as long as they did not conflict with Roman law. Now he hears that by Jewish law Jesus was deserving of execution, and he has a problem. He could be accused of failing to carry out his duties if he didn’t back up the religious leaders.

The other reason this upset Pilate was this was the first he had heard about Jesus being the Son of God. Prior to this it had all being about Jesus being the supposed king. This talk of Jesus being divine is new and unsettling to him. Most people of that day believed that the gods could actually come and walk among people on earth. We don’t know how devout Pilate was in such beliefs, but it was enough to unnerve him. He wanted no part of punishing some god who had power. He needed to investigate that claim. This leads to the next thing we learn about Pilate that day.

PILATE THOUGHT HE HAD POWER AND CONTROL

Pilate asked Jesus in verse 9, “Where do you come from?” He wasn’t concerned about where Jesus was born or grew up. He undoubtedly already knew that he had grown up in Nazareth. He wanted to find out if he was from earth. He was concerned that maybe this guy had come here from heaven and was more than the normal human being that he appeared to be.

Jesus didn’t say a thing to him. I’ve wondered why he didn’t. I think there were two factors in his silence. The first was he knew there was no way he could explain his true nature to Pilate in a way that he could understand it. Pilate’s concept of the gods was so far off base that he really wouldn’t get what Jesus was saying. Jesus knew he wasn’t going to save Pilate’s soul that day. The other factor, I believe, is that Jesus was weary by this point. He's been up all night. He’s been subjected to repeated interrogations. He’s been beaten and mocked. He knows how this is all going to end, and he’s thinking, “Could we just get this over with, please?”

Pilate was irked by Jesus’ silence. He was sort of offended. “You dare refused to speak to me?” he asked. Then he asked a significant, but not totally accurate question. “Don’t you realize I have power either to free you or crucify you?” He thought he had power. He believed that Jesus’ life was in his hands. He controlled what was going to happen to Jesus. He could set him free or he could order that he be executed. Jesus’ response is profound. “You would have no power over me if it were not given you from above.” Jesus is claiming that God has power over Pilate and everything he does. If Jesus’ Father didn’t want Pilate to order Jesus’ execution, then he would not be able to do it. Jesus could have stopped all of what happened that night in an instant. Pilate only have the authority to make a decision today because God the Father allowed him to have it.

What a powerful statement. Jesus was making it clear that all that was happening to him was within the sovereign control of Almighty God. Pilate saw things only in the human plane. Through his grid all of life is determined by what people do. Those with power are in control and decide how things go. That’s an understandable perspective, for it is undeniable that what people do has enormous impact on us. But Jesus said there is a greater force at work. People can only do what God allows them to do. Jesus taught that God is present in this world, that he has a plan that is at work and that nothing can prevent his plan from working out in our world. In Job 42:2 Job said to God, “I know that you can do all things and no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”

In the book of Daniel, the prophet, writing 500 years before Jesus arrived, prophesied the course of history as revealed to him by God. He depicted the Babylonians being a world power who would be replaced by the Medo-Persians, who themselves were then succeeded by Greece, which was eventually supplanted by the Roman Empire. Daniel also prophesied that the Messiah would come in the first century, that he would die for other people, and that some time after his death Jerusalem would be destroyed. All of those events involved many decisions and actions by people who were pursuing their own agendas. Each of those empires were seeking only more power for themselves. Yet, pursuing their own human ends and purposes, they carried out God’s plans and purposes without even knowing that’s what they were doing. This is the great sovereign power of God the Father that Jesus alluded to. Pilate, himself, without even knowing it, was playing an instrumental role in accomplishing God’s plan, while thinking he was just doing what he chose to do.

There is one unclear statement in Jesus’ words. In verse 11 he said, “Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of greater sin.” Scholars have long debated the meaning of this. Most likely Jesus was referring to Caiaphas, the high priest, who was leading the charge to get Jesus executed. The religious leaders of Israel should have known that pursuing the death of an innocent man was wrong. Pilate did not have the understanding of God and his will that they did, so what they were doing was worse than what Pilate was about to do.

PILATE CAVED IN TO POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY

Verse 12 says Pilate, from that point on, tried to set Jesus free. I’m pretty sure he did more than is recorded in the Gospels. John and the other Gospel writers couldn’t record every detail for us, but John wanted us to get the picture that Pilate was desperately looking for some way to let Jesus go free. However, in verse 12 the accusers play the trump card, if you’ll excuse that expression in this election year. They said, “If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.” This was a direct threat to Pilate.

Being a “Friend to Caesar” was a big deal. It was a familiar term, almost an official designation. Friends to Caesar were protected. Pilate knew very well how important that was. Falling out of favor with Caesar was a dangerous, often deadly place to be. The accusers were telling Pilate if he didn’t do what they wanted, they would make sure that Caesar heard that he was supporting a man who was a rival to Caesar.

Pilate seems to have really respected Jesus in the end. He said to them, “Here is your king.” This is a guy worthy of being your king. But they said, “Crucify him.” Pilate couldn’t believe it. “You want me to crucify your king?” he asked as though incredulous. These people who hated crucifixion are screaming for it. They said, “We have no king but Caesar.” That was the height of hypocrisy. They wanted no part of Caesar. They chafed under the heel of his boot. They wanted Caesar as their king about as much as I want cilantro soup for dinner. But they were trying to put Pilate in a bind and were doing a good job of it.

Pilate declared Jesus innocent 3 times. Twice he referred to Jesus as their king. But in the end as we see in verse 16, “Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified.” He didn’t do that because it was the right thing to do. He knew it was wrong. He had been doing whatever he could think of to try to release Jesus. But he faced the possibility of being accused of being disloyal to Caesar. The easiest way to avoid that and the scary problems it would bring, was to just execute the man. That’s what he chose to do. He could choose the expedient thing while knowing it was wrong, because he was a relativist who didn’t believe in any truth. If there is no truth, there is no right, no wrong, there’s just doing what you can do. So he chose to take the path of least resistance and handed Jesus over to be killed in the most horrifying way.

IMPLICATIONS

THE BIG QUESTION IS WHO IS IN CONTROL

There are several opinions on the answer to that huge question.

***We Are In Control***

We think it is up to us to make life the way we want it to be. In one sense that is certainly true. We can make choices and try our best to carry out those choices. Generally speaking if we make good choices we get good consequences. But there are no guarantees. Sometimes random and seemingly unfair things that we have no control over happen to us, and there’s nothing we can do to change it.

I had a curious moment when I got some insight on the nature of life during in a baseball game when I was in college. My sophomore year I had a friend on the team who was a big, strong guy. Unlike me, he had a lot of power as a hitter. One game I frustrated him. I got 3 hits and drove in a couple of runs. He crushed the ball in two of his at bats, but both times the ball was caught right at the fence. He got no hits. One of my hits was a ball I barely got my bat on and it dribbled about 30 feet down the third base line, but I beat it out for a hit. Another hit was a weak blooper that just went over the other team’s second baseman’s glove. The last was a weak ground ball that just snuck between the first and second basemen. My friend told me if I put all of my hits together end to end they wouldn’t have gone as far as one of his fly balls. Neither of us completely controlled what happened that day. I controlled how I practiced, and that day I controlled which pitches I swung at and how hard I swung. But I didn’t control whether I got hits. I had no control over the fact that the balls I hit couldn’t have been placed any better. I got hits and he didn’t, but the truth was he was the better hitter. You just couldn’t tell it from the results. After that game I thought about how in many ways life imitates baseball. I control my actions and choices, but I don’t control the outcomes.

I was just told by a friend about a relative in their extended family that was the healthiest guy alive. He was in tremendous shape. He ate a ridiculously healthy diet, he did all the right things. And he died suddenly in his 50’s. He controlled what he could control, but that didn’t include the outcome.

When we think we control how life goes, we put enormous stress on ourselves and we set up lots of conflict with other people because if we are going to control our lives, we need to control them too, and they typically are not in favor of that program. In the end we set ourselves up for disappointment, because, while we clearly do control many things in life, we are not in control of the outcomes.

***Other Powerful People***

I once had a conversation with a neighbor who began talking about nameless powerful people who control things and who have a huge impact on our lives through their manipulations. He wasn’t real clear about just who those people are, but he knew they were there. He might be a little extreme, but that kind of thinking is common. We think everything is about people and about who has the power. So people manipulate, maneuver and fight for power.

This has a couple of effects. Similar to the first possibility, it dooms us to lots of conflict as we fight with others for power. But it also has a second very negative effect. We find that there are “those people” who are powerful and beyond our reach, people we can’t defeat. So we become victims. Having the victim mentality fills us with bitterness and resentment toward “those people.” Clearly other people have big effects on us. But they don’t control what we think and how we respond to what happens to us. In the end they are just finite humans whose power is always limited.

***Unknown Forces***

Some people think that there are some forces out there somewhere that control what happens in our lives. Maybe it’s the stars, which is why you can find horoscopes in the newspaper if you look for it. Maybe it’s some other occult force out there, or maybe it’s just “the universe.” But the universe is an inanimate thing. Saying it is directing your life or wants you to do something is about the same thing as saying the patio table in our backyard wants you to do something or is directing your life. It’s just a thing. It has no plans and no power over your choices. This kind of thinking has a couple of possible paradoxical effects. One is to try to somehow control those forces to get them to work on your behalf, which is what a lot of occult practices might do. The other is to end up with a sense of helplessness.

***No one and nothing***

This is really the religion of our culture. No one is in control. Life is purely a matter random events and accidents. There is no plan. There is no purpose or direction to it, and there is no meaning to it. Stuff just happens for no apparent reason.

Physicist and author Leonard Miodinow has written a book about randomness, calling the book, *The Drunkard*’*s Walk*, as a way of describing the reeling nature of our seemingly random plunge through this world. In his book he said, “Random processes are fundamental in nature and ubiquitous in our every day lives.” Elise O’Kane was a flight attendant with United Airlines. Every month she would work on a flight from Boston to Los Angeles. In August, 2001, when she bid on her schedule for September she accidentally entered a wrong code, and did not get the flight she always flew. She tried the day before the flight to request a change so she could get on that flight but the airline’s system froze. By the time it was up and running again she had missed the deadline by one minute. She resigned herself to her assigned schedule and missed the flight she wanted. That flight was United 175 from Boston to LA on September 11, but it never made it to LA. Instead it flew into a World Trade Center tower in New York. She wasn’t on the flight because of a mistake and a computer system locking up. After researching and hearing thousands of stories of that monumental day, journalist Garrett Graff wrote a book titled, *The Only Plane In The Sky*, and in it said, “After reading and hearing thousands of these stories I am overwhelmed by the unfair randomness of the day.”

All of us have been bemused at times at the random things that have happened to us. Some people say that’s all there is. Stuff just happens for no apparent reason. But this perspective has some issues. One is it tends to create some hopelessness, but even if that doesn’t happen it creates an emptiness, a sense that there is no meaning to any of this. It also can leave a person with a vague unease, for despite the often random seeming nature of things, over the long haul people often get a strange sense that something has been at work in their lives moving the chess pieces around. There are too many coincidences to ignore, and this curious sense that they have ended up where they were somehow supposed to be.

In his book, *Jayber Crow*, novelist Wendell Berry has the title character say, “Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I deserved. Often my faintest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led—make of that what you will.” That’s a common feeling among many of us. I can look back at my life and see twists and turns, mistakes, roadblocks, seemingly unfortunate events, and somehow Infeel like I’ve ended up where I should be.

***God Is In Control***

This is what Jesus maintained. Pilate was where he was and had the power he had because God allowed that to happen and was using him to accomplish his plan. As I have pointed out, this is what the Bible teaches. Psalm 139 tells us that each day that is appointed for us is written in God’s book. The days are in fact appointed for us. There is a plan, and what might seem random is actually weaving a picture that will be glorious some day. That’s why Psalm 118 tells us that this is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

But what about those powerful people who run things in this world? Hey, what about the election? What if the candidate I want doesn’t get elected? Listen to this, you powerful people. Daniel 2:21 says God deposes kings and raises up others. He rules over the rulers. Like Pilate, they would have no power if he did not allow them to have it. Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.”

We won’t always be able to see the plan. Most of the time we won’t. That’s part of the message of the book of Job. There was a plan in his life, but he never knew what it was. He simply trusted the Planner. Our trip to Texas last week began with a delay as we sat in a plane on a taxiway at Lindbergh Field waiting for the airport in Dallas to open after a weather shut down. About an hour out of Dallas our pilot informed us that we needed to remain in our seats with seatbelts on because it was going to get bumpy due to thunderstorms in the area. Yeah, he’s just making that up because he wants to control us. Turns out he wasn’t making stuff up. Have you ever been on the Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland? It bumps and jerks and tries to scare you. This was kind of like that, only much more severe. Our pilot son in law, Michael, has helped me deal with turbulence, explaining it’s no threat to the airplane, it’s just like driving on a bumpy road. Hey, people pay good money to go on rides like this at amusement parks. Yeah, but they’re not trapped in a metal tube 35,000 feet in the air. You can’t really see anything outside the airplane, you aren’t sure where you are and you have no control whatsoever over what is happening to you. What a relief when that plane safely touched down in Dallas. A friend had a flight following app and sent us a picture of the route our flight had taken. We could see that the pilots had been weaving around between cells of thunderstorms to avoid the worst of it. We had no idea what they were doing, but they had been in control the whole time.

Sometimes life is going to feel just like that to us. Life gets bumpy. It can be a kind of scary. We don’t know where we are, and much that is happening is out of our control. We might be frustrated and feel lost and even scared. But as we keep following God, amazingly, he gets us where we need to go.

This has enormous impact on our lives, for if it is true, and I’m going to go with Jesus on this and say it is, then it does several things. It sets us free from trying to control people and events that are actually out of our control anyway. Rather than trying to control everything we can focus our attention on being and doing what God wants us to be and do day in and day out. We can leave the outcome of it all to God. When we don’t understand why some things that are out of our control happen, we can trust those things to God and keep moving forward.

The army has long used a weapon system called the TOW to attack enemy tanks and armored vehicles. Officially that stands for “tube launched, optically tracked, wire guided missile.” It has one drawback. The team firing the weapon has to keep its targeting device aimed at the target, leaving them vulnerable to counter fire. In the past few years they have had a new weapon called the Javelin that is a fire and forget weapon. That means the man using the system aims at the target, fires the weapon then can seek cover, the missile guides itself to the target. I kind of think of that as our approach to life. We fire, do our best to do what God wants, then forget, leaving the outcome to him. It’s kind of like me in that baseball game so many years ago. We do our best, we take our swings, then God determines what happens. We can leave that to him and rest.

This brings us great peace. We can trust God’s plan and work and now that he will bring about the result he wants. We don’t have to fret. Laurie and I had an interesting brief conversation with someone last week. This woman asked about our church and we told her we have a very small church. She asked, “Why don’t you just join with a bigger church?” I get why some people might think that. They sort of think, “Well that’s not a very big and impressive ministry. Surely you’d want something better, right?” I could easily get discouraged and down on myself, feeling like I’ve failed because I’m doing such a small thing that isn’t having a huge impact or impressing anyone. But because God is in control, I can fire and forget. I’ve seen pastors make huge mistakes because they thought the outcome was up to them and they had to control it, make it go the way they want. They use and even abuse people, they damage their own relationships, they ruin their health in the effort to make it come out the way they want. What freedom there is when we just see our role as being faithful to be and do what God wants, and trusting him with the outcome. The end result of my efforts is up to him, not to me, so I can fire and forget. I can relax, be at peace, care about God’s people and try to honor him, then let it be. It is an awesome way to live.

Friday was a big day in our family. For Laurie and me that day the number of grandchildren we have grew from 5 to 6. Toby and Anna’s adoption of little 2 year old Jackson was finalized. He is now Jackson Peter Myatt. Remarkably, after the official declaration at the courthouse he said, “I am a Myatt.” During the proceedings the judge asked some questions of Toby and Anna and their girls. At one point she asked Ella, “Will you be a great big sister to Jackson?” She answered, “I already am.” I was amazed at her confidence. She is in a courtroom, being asked a question by a judge, a rather intimidating situation, and she calmly and confidently responded without an ounce of hesitation or concern. When we are certain of God’s care and guidance of us and our lives, we can have that kind of calm confidence.

On top of that it loads our lives with meaning. All these things, whether random or not, are leading to an end that God has designed. Everything we are and do has meaning. Either we trust our ability to control life, or we must trust God’s power and plan. It is in trusting him that we find peace and meaning. So let’s learn to fire and forget, leaving the results to God.