

An Inheritance of Grace

There is a movie that came out about ten years ago called August Rush. In it, August is a musical prodigy living in an orphanage, who the other boys taunt, telling him he has been abandoned and will never be adopted because no one would want him; they say that he is not only unloved but unloveable. But August knows, in spite of all evidence to the contrary and everyone in the world telling him otherwise, that he is not actually an orphan, that he has parents and that they in fact do love him and will want him. Because he knows this in the core of his being, in a way that won't let him sleep at night, he knows he is loved in a way that makes music spring forth from his very being, he sets out on a fantastical journey to find his parents and he has faith that he will succeed because he believes that the universe must simply be made right, that the dissident notes must ultimately find the proper melody. So he ventures into New York, singing and playing until his voice finds its harmony in the song of his family.

It is a cute movie, though somewhat absurd in its premise, almost to the point that I feel a little silly enjoying it - a lost boy playing his way through New York City in search of people he can't prove exist but feels somehow inside of his heart that in the midst of eight million people he will find his rightful place as the beloved child of two caring parents who want nothing more than to dote on him. I feel like it's silly because that is not how the world works in my experience, but I like it because I want it to be. I want to believe in that world.

It seems frivolous, but it is no more incredible than this: "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption ... according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us." Because God has "a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and on earth." In the midst of the billions of people who have lived in this world throughout the ages, we are asked to believe that before the earth was formed, God chose to love us, to bear God's image, to call us children of the divine, and give us the inheritance of the heavens. And in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, in a world that seems like it is falling apart and evil too often winning, we are asked to have faith that Jesus is working to gather all that is scattered and broken into the wholeness of God's perfect will for the world.

Forget the overarching narrative, the language itself, with the piling up of lofty superlatives, is so elevated that it seems tough to grasp. I am a pragmatist, living in the real world, hoping to make small tangible steps to better that world, and avoiding such extravagant visions because I think they lead to difficult falls and disappointment. And yet, in the deep recesses of my heart, in the place that likes to watch movies that seem almost too silly to warrant my time, I want to believe in that beautiful story of Ephesians, while my reasonable brain and experience of the world snaps me back and tells me not to put too much hope in it. But the logic of the situation is this - you can stay in the orphanage and be hammered day after day by the incessant voices that tell you that you are unloveable, you will be alone, there is no greater place

for you, or you can believe in your soul that you are a beloved child, there is an inheritance for you, and that if you step out into the world you will be caught up in Christ's ingathering of all that is his, and that includes you. The middle ground is not a tenable place. The inheritance is a way of life; you either accept it and live into it, or reject it, but you can't kind of accept an inheritance. It doesn't work very well that way.

Now, I'm not completely ignoring the gospel today because it has the terrible beheading story of John the Baptist. I think that passage is quite important. The John story is just a bit of historical background. The frame of the story is that Herod hears what Jesus is doing and he is afraid. Fear is why he had imprisoned John the Baptist in the first place. He had heard about the demons being cast out and the sick being cured, and Jesus' radical new paradigm taking root and he was afraid. Here's the important part: Herod was afraid because he believed it was true, and it would undermine his kingdom. He came by this fear naturally. Maybe you will remember his father, Herod the Great also believed and was equally afraid. The wise men came to him and told him that the messiah who would be king of the Jews had been born, and Herod believed them, was terrified, and so had all Jewish boys under two put to the sword. It's a family tradition.

And Herod should have been afraid, not because there was no place for him in the kingdom of God, but because there was no future in his vision of the world. Herod kept his power through scattering, and splintering, and subjugating, and Jesus was gathering, and healing, and empowering, and that was a full on attack on the power of Herod's kingdom.

The demon possessed had been reclaimed as human beings and therefore the rightful inheritance of the Christ who came into the world to capture the fullness of humanity. Jesus was taking back possession of them and calling them his. The sick who were written off and shunned were restored and grafted back into society. The debtor was given value. The foreigner was made family. The downtrodden were lifted up. The disenfranchised were given voice. That is the inheritance of grace - the gathering of all things onto the Christ. And all of that threatened the economy of Herod's reality because his world was based on telling some that they weren't worthy of love, that they had no inherent worth, that they were not fully human. The reality of the Son of God in the world left no place for that because Jesus was not just fully human in the sense that he was in fact flesh and blood. When we say that he was fully human we mean that he was calling onto himself the fullness of humanity, drawing in all people, calling them sons and daughters of God, just like him. Herod understood that, believed it on some level, and yet operated in a reality that would not allow for it, and the dissonance caused fear and paranoia, because the middle ground is untenable.

This inheritance of grace was destined before the foundation of the world and it was woven into the fabric of creation. The truth of the gospel flickers in the hearts of scattered humanity because they were marked for adoption when they were made and no oppressive regime can defeat it. It is the power of the gay man who has always known, whether others affirm and accept it or not, that his love is every bit as reflective of God's eternal love as anyone else's. It is the African American mother weeping over the senseless killing of her beloved son, knowing that he deserved better than that fate because he wasn't just her son, he was the adopted child of God, and co-heir with Christ. Black lives matter is the cry of Jesus gathering up all the scattered things and pulling them into the reconciling power of the gospel. It is the Greek debtor saying I am not meant to grovel, because I have an eternal inheritance and I am of infinite worth. It is the man underemployed since 2008 who knows deep in his soul that he has something meaningful to contribute to humanity, even if he's still waiting for a world redeemed enough to

recognize it. Somewhere in every human being there is shame that dare not show its face but still prays to believe that there is redemption and forgiveness in the riches of God's love lavished on us, and that is the inheritance of grace. And Jesus is gathering things in to make it eternally real.

So, every person whose place is built on the subjugation of another, everyone whose prestige is based on making another outcast, all who seek to deal with their own feelings of unworthiness by shaming others -all of these should be afraid, because just like King Herod, there is no future in those narratives. If we are to believe the story of the Gospel, we must know that in the fullness of time Christ's purpose is for the blessing of God's adopted children. It is the only eternal future.

God is reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ, because the plan is that in the fullness of time he will gather all things to him in heaven and on earth. We can believe in that beautiful picture or not; the ultimate result is the same either way. The more important questions are these: Will our hope that it is true be at least as strong as Herod's fear that it is true? Will our actions to make that gospel narrative a reality be at least as effective as the deeds of those who wish to keep the kingdom of God at bay? Will we listen to that quiet voice of our inheritance that lives deep within us, even when the demeaning shouts of the world seem so loud, and trust in the story of grace enough to step out and find the arms of Christ gathering us in? It is almost too wonderful to believe, and yet nothing else is worth hoping in. Amen.