

Very Dear To Us: John The Bagman

1Thessalonians 2:1-8

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters,
that our coming to you was not in vain,
but though we had already suffered
and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know,
we had courage in our God to declare to you
the gospel of God in spite of great opposition.

For our appeal does not spring from deceit
or impure motives or trickery,
but just as we have been approved by God
to be entrusted with the message of the gospel,
even so we speak, not to please mortals,
but to please God who tests our hearts.

As you know and as God is our witness,
we never came with words of flattery
or with a pretext for greed;
nor did we seek praise from mortals,
whether from you or from others,
though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.

But we were gentle among you,
like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children.

So deeply do we care for you
that we are determined to share with you
not only the gospel of God but also our own selves,
because you have become very dear to us.

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I.

As you all have realized, today is the *dreaded* stewardship sermon. Short of manufacturing a sudden coughing fit, there is no getting out of it now. You are stuck there in your pew for the duration. That, my friends is the *bad* news.

The *good* news is I am going to take a very atypical, or indirect approach to talking about Stewardship. This morning we are going to endeavor to find meaning in the tangential and, then, draw a connection back to our reality. Admittedly, this connection may seem quite loose and fleeting but, hopefully, the realness of the connection will reveal itself quite vividly if only for a few passing moments. Something akin to a casual greeting offered by a person we have just passed by, or are trying to just pass by.

II.

I am guessing that many of you have become aware of the slight gentleman who has taken to inhabiting the foyer of the church. This would be Mr. Karl Granger. Looking back at my records, I can tell you that Mr. Granger has been part of *my* life for the past seven years. Up until recently, Mr. Granger lived in Gouveneur and would only visit Canton. Usually to knock on the manse door, with some unpaid bill as proof of need, and ask for assistance. Let me say, I have never doubted for a instant the genuineness of the need. Over those seven years, our church has consistently and *generously* supported him. Believe me when I tell you, there has been no lack of compassion or benevolence on our part.

However, two years ago or so I had to make the decision to draw a line because his need is never ending. Since then, we give him a gift at Christmas and a gift on his birthday. This past summer Mr. Granger moved to Canton and now some portion of his daily routine includes time spent in the church foyer waiting for the bus, warming up, or just passing time. Seemingly, Mr. Granger is the poor who we will always have with us.

III.

The past few weeks I have been determined to clean out the two closets in my office which, over the past 25 years, have slowly been filling to the brim with boxes, band equipment, ministry doo-dads, ancient artifacts from my past life prior to arriving in Canton and, even, one rubber chicken. During this same period of time I have also been apprenticed to Jim Durham who, at age 85, is gracious enough to continue caring for the boilers here at the church that heat the foyer, Christian Ed, wing, choir room, and narthex.

Between the boiler maintenance, problem solving, and repairs, *and* removing two pick-up truck loads of stuff from my office, I have been at the church pretty much every day. This has given me the opportunity to interact with Mr. Granger, and we have developed an on-going and easy banter. Once in a while he will visit the food pantry or take me up on an offered cup of coffee. Mostly, though, he just sits and talks to himself.

IV.

Which, at the same time, is pretty much what I am doing except the talk is in my head (mostly). Mr. Granger prompts me to consider needs, which leads to mission, which leads to the work and mission of our church, which leads to stewardship. Now, I know that what folks give to help support the church is, in the end, going to be based on how our church and this pastor has served the community, the world, and the people in our congregation over the past year. So, the Stewardship sermon really is not a make it or break it kind of thing. Most folks aren't going to walk away and say, *"Nope, can't support the church this year, Rev. Mike had a lousy stewardship sermon."* Neither, though, will people say, *"Wow! What a great stewardship sermon! Where's my check book, how can I sign up to help around the church?"* Mercifully, it doesn't work that way. However, I do think that each year it is import to consider "why" we give so that "what" we give becomes more readily apparent to each of us. Having said all of that, I now want to tell you a true story which Mr. Granger has helped to make bubble up from my distant past, and to use this story to get at the idea of stewardship.

V.

John the Bagman was a fixture at Bucknell University, my undergraduate college, for at least two decades, maybe three. If you were do an internet search, you will find exactly two hits (3 with this sermon). One is a letter to

the editor in the January 2004 edition of the Bucknell World published shortly after John's death. And another from the archives of a small town newspaper noting the post-graduation plans of Mifflinburg High School's class of 1948. John was to attend Susquehanna University, while his sister, Jean, was to attend Shippensburg State College. Not much of a digital footprint, but if an obscure Presbyterian minister from Canton is preaching on you 22 years after your death you can be sure you made a significant impact on the world; the lack of electronic evidence notwithstanding.

VI.

John's actual name was John Throssel Jr. Though some in the University community, in an effort to be more politically correct, referred to him as "Good Luck John" (and this was in no way a bad idea) he was always known to me, and to everyone else I ever knew, simply and with no small amount of affection as, "John the Bagman." Now, John was kind of a mysterious guy. You could find him just about anywhere on or around the campus. Usually, though, he would hang out in the academic quad near the entrance to Vaughan Literature Building a stone's throw from Bertrand Library. I am talking about pretty much *every* day, *all* day, in *any* kind of weather.

For most of the year John usually wore a big knit hat, long wool overcoat, baggy pants and galoshes. His unusually large nose was often running, requiring him to wipe it with an immense hanky. Moreover, he was always carrying around at least one, if not two double bagged brown paper grocery sacks. Hence the "bagman" moniker.

VII.

Who, or how it was decided to allow John such full access to the campus and to maintain this presence there for so many years, I do not know. Most colleges would have quickly and quietly thrown him off the campus. Thanks heavens for small miracles. Looking back, John really had three claims to fame. The *first* was his peculiar appearance and abiding presence. The *second* was his habit of always, and I mean *always*, saying "Good Luck" to every single person who crossed his path. If at some point in your college career you stopped to actually have a conversation with him, he would remember your name and from then on it would be "Good luck, *Michael*." When you first heard him say it to others, or if he said it to you, you would think to yourself "Well, that's odd." However, after a while "Good luck"

became a very comforting thing to hear as you hurried from class to class. And the thing is, he *meant* it.

VIII.

Just so you realize I am not overly romanticizing the guy I want to read to you a part of this letter to the editor written by Ian Cannell class of '99, whom I have never met:

I had the pleasure of knowing Mr. John Throssel Jr. quite well. I befriended him, or maybe he befriended me, during the mid-to-late '90s while I was studying on campus. Calling him my mentor would not be a stretch. What is most important about John, then and now, are the first-rate principles he stood for and tried to instill in others. There was no self-centered absorption with this man. He always put others first. He was an omnipresent pillar of strength one could always count on. His friendship in my life was monumental. I learned as much from him as I did in the classroom. He taught me self-discipline and how to think positively. Furthermore, John showed me how to genuinely believe in myself. The faith and support I gained from him throughout my four years at Bucknell are the greatest gifts I've ever received. John Throssel was a first-class gentleman and benevolent human being. I will always hold him in the highest regard. In many ways, John was a role model for us all. He certainly was for me. Thank you, John, for all the great memories and moments of inspiration. It was an honor knowing you.

John the Bagman was the real deal. Spend any amount of time speaking with him and you walked away absolutely sure of two things: he was a stunningly kind and gracious man and he was crazy as a loon.

IX.

You see, a very devout Christian, John's *third* claim to fame was his sense of prophetic call to go to Israel and start a church there (I am not sure I ever got any more details than that). I eventually decided that through his presence on the campus he hoped to make the proper connections or raise enough money to fulfill his dream and call to ministry. This was literally his life's work, and he labored at it in a way that would put Sisyphus to shame. That he never achieved this dream is, in one way, shameful. *So many people* with eventual access to *tremendous* power and *enormous* wealth were touched, deeply, by this man but no one, seemingly, ever threw him a bone. Why? Well, probably because we all thought he was crazy. But, even if you didn't think he was crazy, you had a really hard time wrapping your mind around him.

X.

His theology was certainly very conservative, even evangelical; but he never proselytized, and he was certainly never judgmental. Make no mistake about it, though, the profoundness of his faith was immediately evident. And, in a weird way, incredibly soothing. It was real, tangible, and it made a difference. It caused you realize, perhaps for the first time in your life, that such a thing as an authentic faith was even possible. Then there was his depth of conviction and his commitment to the cause. He gave up so very much to stand next to that pillar outside Vaughn Lit.: children, earning potential, warmth, and years of his life. We just do not see that kind of sacrifice any more in this modern world. And if we do, we are usually more apt to treat it as suspect rather than admirable. Finally, and this one is way down in the gut, the courage to bend, alter, and change one's life in response to God's call. That kind of faith, to that degree, is almost too much to handle.

XI.

Now some of you are sitting there saying, "Great story, but what does this have to *do* with Stewardship, or the scripture passage from 1 Thessalonians?" Fair enough, so I am going to start reeling us in now...

Spending so much time at the church the past few weeks has caused me to marvel at the sheer ENORMITY of this building. Go outside and walk around the entire building for yourself some time. I, myself, do this every once in a while when I need a reality check about why I am here and Canton and I am doing here at the church. See the size of the stone blocks, the spires, the height, the slate roof, the steeple. And *every* time I do this, the physical size translates symbolically into just how much is required just to keep this place going, not just for the next 100 years but, more importantly, for this next *calendar* year.

XII.

Then, just as I am thinking this, I hear the siren sound of that voice inside me which says, wouldn't it be great if we could raise enough money to really *do* some things here at the church both in terms of facilities and program? Wouldn't it be great to not have to scrimp and cut and make do (or get out of bed to walk next door to shut off the light that was left on in the sanctuary because you're so uptight about money)? There is so much I want for this church so much I know is *possible* and so much I know is *needed*.

How, though, do we get past “this” so we can start doing “that?” I admit I am getting a little bit tired of “this...” and impatiently wish to know when do I get to do “that?” And, just then, Mr. Granger comes into the foyer and takes his usual seat on the pew in front of the heat register and it hits me: *John the Bagman*.

XIII.

John Throssel, Jr., never got “that.” He never saw the fulfillment of his dream to begin a church in Israel. Instead, he had to just keep doing “this.” Standing in the academic quad of Bucknell University, clad in thrift shop clothes, middle of winter, nose running, paper sacks in hand, saying, “Good Luck” to everyone he met. But, crazy as “this” was, boy oh boy, how “this” touched lives, how “this” changed the world.

See, I’ve decided, if the best I do in my life and the best we do as a church is to be like John the Bagman well, then we have done all right. Stunningly kind and gracious, not to mention crazy as a loon, are not bad hallmarks of a life well lived.

XIV.

Now, if you do not think it is crazy to take your hard earned money and give it to the *church*, ask around. Just don’t ask too loudly. Because I am here to tell you, it *is* crazy; crazy as a loon.

For almost all of our time here in Canton Linda and I pinched pennies to feed, clothe, and raise three kids. Every year the stewardship mailing would arrive and we would sit down to fill out the pledge card. Then, we would look at each other and one of us would say, “Got to do it.” So, we would raise our pledge.

Why? Because we believe that our church is one of the very few places in our world where authentic faith is made real and tangible. Yes, some might say we are a bit conservative, even evangelical in our beliefs. I prefer to say that we actually *believe* there is something to believe *in*, and that’s a *good* thing. If you would like to hear about it, we are certainly be pleased to share with you what we have discovered along the way. Otherwise, please excuse us while we go about the business of being the church.

XV.

Yes, it takes an awful lot of conviction to be “the church” because, truth be told, though there is a lot of work to be done, there really aren’t a lot of us here to do it. So we have to sacrifice and give up things, time, money, and energy, to make *sure* that the church happens. And, yes, we understand just how crazy this will look to the rest of the world. But see, we have heard God’s call to us, and we are just trying our hardest and walking our softest in response to it. For us, there is *no* other choice.

So, like the John the Bagman standing for years in front of Vaughn Lit and Mr. Granger sitting in our foyer, we have staked out our spot in the world here on the Park in Canton New York and, God willing, “this” is where we will stay. However, rather than say “Good Luck” to those who happen to pass by, we are going venture far from our corner and to every person we find we will say:

“So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” Amen.