

Something That Will Last

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-25

February 13, 2022

Brian Russo

Once upon a time, some thousands of years ago, there lived a man named Demetrius. He was rather skilled with his hands and had a mind for trade. He was a silversmith in name, but a sculptor in his heart, and he took great pride in his art. He lived decently enough, but it wasn't always that way. You see, he worked hard from childhood and grinded all his days; and so he believed he deserved what he earned, and his sweat and blood was merit plenty.

He owned a small shop, a booth really, on a major thoroughfare and every morning he rose with the sun and spent the afternoon selling his crafts. At night he would toil away, making new creations by moon and candle light while his wife prepared early for the morning breakfast. And for the weeks that followed the months and the years, this routine repeated itself in much the same way. But as time went on, and the population increased, and tourism picked up, Demetrius' little business began to grow. In fact, it boomed. At first he couldn't believe his luck, but after a while he started to believe it would never change.

He noticed that one of his items was selling tenfold more than the others, and so he thought to himself, I can compound my riches if I go all-in. So he discarded most of his inventory and began to forge only that product. He called it Diana, while other artisans called her Artemis. But in the end, did a name really matter? All that mattered was that this small, silvery, shrine-like trinket of his sold in droves and multiplied his profits. And even better, it bore the likeness of his idol and goddess, the very daughter of Leto and Zeus; and so he believed he would be divinely blessed, and ever would it last.

Well, on a day which began much like any other, Demetrius went to his shop and noticed that the line of customers was about ten deep. He smiled and began to laugh once more at his good fortune, but then he heard a loud shriek. A sort of nasally pitched loud shriek coming out of the mouth of this little bald man standing in the corner. A creature who went by the name of Paul.

And this Paul was bothering his customers, exclaiming as loud as he could that Diana was a fraud. That this shrine to Artemis was false and a waste of time and money. For really there was only one God, who was not worshipped in a building or through an artifact, but who was made accessible anywhere, anytime, and known by and through his only son, Jesus the Anointed One who had the words of life eternal. But worst of all for poor Demetrius, his customers actually listened to this bald man. Both this day, the next day, and the one after that. Instead of coming back to his booth, they began following Paul and reading his letters. All around Ephesus, and even in Corinth and Rome. And so it happened, that months later, there was no line, no attendance, and no money, and Demetrius was forced to close up his shop and put away his shrines. And he went to bed dreaming of rebellion and killing that little man.

But in his heart he knew. He knew it was pointless for it was over. For what had come had come, and what had changed had changed. What had once seemed so sure, so secure, so known, was just, well, gone. And quite likely never to return.

The story you just heard appears also in the nineteenth chapter of Acts. An obscure, perhaps, often untold story, so forgive me, I beg you, my embellishments. The book of Acts, you may remember, was written by the same author of the gospel of Luke, the same narrator who recounts the lesson of Blessings and Woes that we heard from Jesus today. The event between Demetrius and Paul took place in the city of Ephesus; and in that same city, 500 years earlier, a Greek Philosopher by the name of Heraclitus penned the same theme: that the only thing we can trust happening in life is something different. For “nothing lasts forever” as “nothing endures but change.”

Nothing lasts forever. Nothing endures but change. Just ask Doug Pederson. That guy went from the top to just about the bottom, wouldn't you say? From winning the Super Bowl with the Eagles to being out of coaching only three years later. Well, now he's back, but it's with the Jaguars, so he might as well still be out.

And what about your boy, James Harden; this basketball superstar was once a young key-piece on a championship contending team. Then he got traded for a Lamb and a bag of peanuts so that the billionaire owner could save some money. Then, like Demetrius, he grinded his way and reshaped his game and won an MVP, only to be shipped out for 4 future lottery tickets. Then, on Thursday this past week, he was traded from a super-team to an okay-team in a deal for a Young Socialite and an off-brand Curry. Nothing endures but change. Good luck, Sixers fans.

And how about, finally, poor Mikaela Shiffrin? This amazing Olympiad, this incredible, once-in-a-lifetime talent won golds, and silvers, and bronzes; tournaments, and cups, and medals. She did it with grace, without pomp or hubris. She did it for herself but also for her country, and she was our darling. Well, until our country's pinnacle network decided to exploit her and in a time of great pain after she failed her second run at this year's Olympics. I said enough, especially on Facebook, but if you watched their coverage this week it was both gross and wrong, and another stark reminder that nothing lasts forever, even sometimes the good opinion of our peers. And so perhaps the only thing we can trust happening in life is something different and maybe even worse.

“But woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry,” Jesus says. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.” In dramatic fashion Jesus spells it all out. And while I don't think he's actually upset with people who like comedy, or who've had a filling breakfast, I think he's making the case that it simply all returns in time. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes, earth to earth.

And that's really the story of being human, isn't it? Of mortality in a fallen state. Of living and aging. We get wrinkles, our hair thins, our pace slows, such that by the end we are where we began, in a room somewhere with someone helping us dress and feeding us by spoon. But it's nothing to be too sad about. It's just how this world keeps turning. Like the tide that comes in and slowly turns rock into sand, it retreats, restarts, and does so again and again.

In this frightening world, where pandemics continue, hate spreads, and the drumbeat of war grows ever louder, all we can really do is try to adapt and adjust, and make the most of what we have, whenever and if ever we are fortunate enough to have it.

And that's easier said than done of course. I know.

Sometimes I sit here in the dark late on Friday or Sunday night, after the cleaning crew has left and I'm all alone. And I watch the shadows lengthen, as the busy world is hushed, and I think about all that has changed. About all that has gone, and that is perhaps unlikely to return.

I mean, no doubt, it was all in motion beforehand, but this pandemic really hammered it home, didn't it? In a tangible and depressing way, we've been actors on the scene for that first paragraph in Jeremiah's prophecy. Living with the brutal and relentless reminder about the curse and frailty of our flesh. For all it took was an invisible little molecule floating in the air to more than half our attendance. And not just ours, but most churches and institutions and playhouses and, well, you all know the rest.

And so I often sit here, there in that back pew near Alice Lea, and I dream of what ifs, and what could ofs, and how once upon a time the church could just open its doors on a Sunday and the masses would follow. And lines would form around the coffee and the cupcakes. And conversations flowed, and laughter was heard, and little children would run between our legs, or at least break through the middle of our gaps. And back there, in the quiet of that pew, I also think of people like Hope Dyer. And Harris Carr. And Robbie up there in the choir and my first kids who are now adults and grown. And sometimes in the back I think I can hear their voices still, but then I'm reminded it's only their echoes reverberating through time. And so I find myself sometimes asking if this new time we're in, without them and countless others, will it last forever? Will it ever change back?

But perhaps, just as certain as change came knocking on our door these past years, maybe it could just as certainly swing us right back. Not into the past, but a new reality. Maybe then this is all our "Paul at Demetrius' booth" sort-of moment. Happening in a place where we once felt so secure, so sure, so known. And just maybe we got too comfortable and too secure here, too carefully organized, that we've held on too tightly to our shrines and artifacts so that we've been unwilling to hear, and engage with, the future that is now calling to us. That is calling us to build towards something that is perhaps pandemic proof. Towards something maybe that will last.

Jeremiah writes in his second paragraph: "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit." In the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. Amen. My friends, all this right now, even if it feels like it, it is not the end. For this too will pass and change once again. For as Jesus also says, "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be fed. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." I believe that once more we will laugh, and once again we will be fed and bear fruit. I believe it. But it's going to take both time and work. And we must, today, be willing to put in that work to be a part of that change.

We can't just come in here and sit passively by waiting for it, lest it change us right out of existence. Nor can we leave here and go back to our privatized lives, our favorite sofa and our silos, and worship at the feet at whatever silvery shrine we've got back there. We can't ignore each other when we're here or when we're in places like the hospital, or even when we're out celebrating somewhere. No, we've got to learn each other's names again and begin once more, if not for the first time, to share and appreciate the ups and downs and middles of this life God has given us together.

And we can start today. In coffee hour. In second hour. When buying chili from our kids. Let's remember that while this place is our sanctuary it is also our home. We pay the bills through our offerings. We keep the lights on through our pledges. We come and go and we can always return. And in this home, ideally, we can create the most lasting memories even from the smallest of things and moments.

In my nearly fifteen years here, I've seen change again and again. And it isn't always bad. For I've seen it at baptisms and confirmations, at youth groups and mission trips, at weddings, in hospitals, and yes even at funerals. When we live and share our lives together, break bread with and care for one another, we can do something really special, and become something more, and build something that lasts. Something that survives even the grave.

This past Saturday was all the proof of that. For 55 years here and 86 years in total, Ned Mitinger lived a life built on this premise. A life of service dedicated to making a difference, a change. And lo and behold, more people were in this church than we've had since Christmas. Coffee hour was lively. Stories were shared. Laughter ensued. And grown children and adults ate cupcakes alike.

My friends, the same God who out of love created us so to know us, who sent his Son so that through Him we might know God, wants us to be in partnership with Him through each other; even when it's quieter, even when it's darker, even when all has seemingly changed for the worse. For love and fellowship is what's at the heart of who we are as God's people, and what will help make all this last.

So let us not be like Demetrius and dream of what could have been.

But let us trust in and follow him who has the words of life eternal.

For it is He, after all, who will transform us yet again.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.