

GOODNESS AND MERCY

JEREMY WALLOCH

Once upon a time there was an old man who lived by himself. And when I say he lived by himself, I mean he lived *by himself*. There wasn't another soul around for 5 miles.

His old family home yielded a familiar routine: fixing a hot breakfast while watching the news, checking the cattle and working the garden, lunching at the café in the *same* chair at the *same* table, picking up the mail and paper at the post office, driving back home to work the ranch, watching tv before falling asleep, starting all over again.

Anyone looking at his life could predict its ending: a heart attack during the night, the café waitress calling the sheriff's department, the sheriff's department calling the funeral home, the funeral home hosting a small gathering of acquaintances.

That, however, is *not* how his story ends. Why?

Every day at lunch he had to sit by a group of other guys. They always had their Bibles open and talked about religious things, but never in the same way, and never in the way he had heard 'religious' people talk before.

One day they talked about a good shepherd persistently seeking one lost sheep ("That sounds like a lot of work," the old man thought), one day they talked about building a foundation on rock instead of sand ("Of course," he thought), one day they talked about a king inviting street people to his banquet ("That would never happen," he thought), one day they talked about someone caring so much about the birds of the air and lilies of the field and naturally caring about *everyone* ("Huh," the old man pondered).

So he got to listening to their conversations more and more, noticing his lunch less and less.

Eventually, though, his eavesdropping got noticed, and he was invited to join their meals.

"Oh no, I don't want to intrude," the man replied politely.

"You are *invited*, get over here," one in the bunch insisted.

So the old man's routine was altered: his table now sat empty, his chair pulled up by the neighbors'.

Since he had never been to church, their conversations confused him, but he didn't care: compared with his regular thoughts, what they talked about seemed *important*.

So after lunch he'd run his errands, but he'd imagine having 100 sheep, losing one, and then leaving the 99 to search for the one. While working around the house he'd wonder why anyone would build a house on windblown sand when they could build on solid rock. While eating supper by himself he'd imagine a king inviting street people to a banquet, and wonder what it would be like if he were invited. Before going to sleep he'd reflect on someone caring a lot about birds and flowers, so naturally caring about him too.

Finally, one day at lunch, while the group was talking about going back into one's mother's womb to be birthed again, something moved him, and he exclaimed, "That's what I want! I want to be found, to build anew, to be invited, to be cared about. I know I'm old, but I want to be reborn."

So he was led over to the old country church, and met the frail, tottering minister, who made the old man look like a football star. The reverend led him to the baptismal font, where there was some water, some oil, some prayers, a candle, and he was on his way.

Before he could leave, though, the luncheon group announced they were going to give the old man a gift. They led him over to a battered pickup, and commanded out of the back two black labs. The two instantly went to the old man, licked his hands, and stood by his side, like well-trained bodyguards.

Well, he never had a dog before, and it seemed silly to get two at his age, but he thanked the men and made his way home.

As he walked into his little house, the dogs stayed right by his ankles. As he walked out to the garden, the dogs stayed right by his side. As he walked into the pasture, he thought he would trip over them because of how close they stayed.

While the old man enjoyed his life much more than ever, and greatly enjoyed his new human and animal companions, he was still not as young as they were, and each passing year brought new passings.

When he stepped out of the hospital trying to take in the word 'cancer,' he thought for a moment his life was over, but then his dogs raced to him from his truck bed, and they seemed to lift him up.

When he received the phone call that his sister had passed, he realized she was gone and he was next, but he just hung up the old phone and let the dogs lay their heads in his lap as he cried.

When eventually he could no longer even walk, he first felt useless and a burden, but then one dog's head appeared beneath each of his hands, and it seemed the harder his situation, the more loving the dogs.

Finally, one late afternoon, sitting by himself, except for the dogs, there came a knock on his door.

"I'm coming!" the old man belted out, working his way over to the entrance.

When he opened it, he was surprised to see a younger man standing there. He didn't know who he was, but he felt familiar, like something you can't quite remember. For their part, the dogs yipped ecstatically upon seeing the visitor.

"How'd you find me way out here?" the older man asked.

"Oh, I get around."

"Well, why are you here?"

After the old man asked his question, and received no immediate reply, he looked up and examined the younger man, and *then* he understood. In his eyes he could see the

expression of power and the presence of restraint, in his hands he could see the scars of betrayal yet the form of gentleness. He suddenly noticed a movement at a distance, so he glanced past the younger man, and saw two vehicles slowly pulling into the drive: the sheriff's cruiser and the long, black Cadillac.

"Is this how it ends?"

The younger man smiled, "You are the lost sheep I am thrilled to have found. You have a foundation not weak as sand, but solid as rock. You are invited to the banquet of the King. You are cherished far more than the birds and flowers crafted with love. I am so proud of you. Now is the time to be reborn."

The old man wept, even while a smile shaped his face, but then he paused.

"I have one request."

"I get this a lot," the younger man replied with a grin.

"It's my dogs. I got them as a present when I was baptized. They got me through my hardest times. They're all I have of any worth."

Then he took a breath, and asked with hope shining out of every syllable, "Can I take them with me?"

"They'll walk you to your new home. After that, well, I don't want to ruin the ending."

So the old man stood right up for the first time in seasons, he took the most energetic steps he had taken in years, and then he called for his old dogs, which were already leaping to his heels.

"Come on, Goodness. Let's go, Mercy."

Some might say this is the end of his story, but you know it is only the beginning. For the remainder of his story, well, "happily ever after" does it no justice.

The psalm reads, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long" (Psalm 23:6 NRSV).

Praise the LORD for His gifts of goodness and mercy as they follow you where you go, comfort you through hard times, and—eventually—guide you home. Amen.