

The Goodness of Effort

About a year ago today, the wheels were just about to come off completely. How do I know? Well, for starters, Facebook memories. The date is June 9th, 2017. The picture is of my wife, Kate, her mom, and our newborn daughter Analeigh in front of a bus at the Tokorozawa train station. There are half-smiles painted on their faces because that's...just what you do when you're getting a picture taken. What's not visible, though, are the struggles that we were already enduring. The severe depression, the blindness that had crept into Kate's right eye, the misdiagnosis of her having a parasite. The three girls were getting ready to go to the Haneda airport to fly to the US for two weeks to seek treatment for Kate's vision. The same two weeks that would see the beginning of my three-year-old daughter Audrey's battle against multiple severe illnesses in Japanese hospitals. It would be months later before she would be fully, and even miraculously, recovered.

Our first two years in the greater Tokyo area were mostly defined by something that was completely outside of our control. Or rather, our time was defined by an increasingly difficult set of circumstances that removed from us the illusion that we were ever in control to begin with. Somehow this knowledge, living through a storm like this, has changed the way that we view life in a profound way. Most of the time it's hard for us to pin down exactly what that is. One element of our new perspective is the simple knowledge that things can change so drastically and so quickly. That our health can decline rapidly and at any moment. These things can shake us, even unnerve us, if thought of outside of the context of a Sovereign God who reigns over it all. Thankfully, we trust in a God who "sits enthroned over the Flood" (Psalm 29:10).

In the past year, especially in the past six months or so, my wife and I have been mulling over the idea of "success." It

seems as though, in our culture, the ones who are elevated and admired the most are those select entrepreneurs who not only have big ideas but who also have concepts that somehow see them through to grand fruition. What is their secret to this “success”? What bit of hidden wisdom might be found in their biographies and inspirational thoughts? And these ideas have other, even more implicit questions for our own work: How do I measure success in what I do, or in what I aspire to do, in light of these, what our culture might consider the pinnacle of excellence?

In the introduction to his book “Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work”, Tim Keller writes about a short story of J.R.R. Tolkien’s called “Leaf by Niggle”. In the story, Niggle, a painter, obsesses over one particular painting. In his mind, he sees a beautiful landscape with a tree and very much desires to see it come to life on canvas. Keller writes,

So he worked on his canvas, ‘putting a touch here, and rubbing out a patch there,’ but he never got much done. There were two reasons for this. First it was because he was the ‘sort of painter who can paint leaves better than trees. He used to spend a long time on a single leaf...’ trying to get the shading and the sheen and the dewdrops on it just right. So no matter how hard he worked, very little actually showed up on the canvas itself. The second reason was his ‘kind heart.’ Niggle was constantly distracted by doing things his neighbors asked him to do for them.

Later on in the story, Niggle, out on yet another task for a neighbor, gets sick and gets ready to die, his painting far from finished. “‘Oh, dear!’ said poor Niggle, beginning to weep, ‘And it’s not even finished!’” After his death, the painting of the leaf is eventually noticed and put in the town museum, viewed by a few people in the years to follow. “But,”

as Keller continues, “the story does not end there.”

After death Niggle is put on a train toward the mountains of the heavenly afterlife. At one point on his trip, he hears two Voices. One seems to be Justice, the severe voice, which says that Niggle wasted so much time and accomplished so little in life. But the other, gentler voice (‘though it was not soft’), which seems to be Mercy, counters that Niggle has chosen to sacrifice for others, knowing what he was doing. As a reward, when Niggle gets to the outskirts of the heavenly country, something catches his eye. He runs to it—and there it is: ‘Before him stood the Tree, his Tree, finished; its leaves opening, its branches growing and bending in the wind that Niggle had so often felt or guessed, and yet had so often failed to catch. He gazed at the Tree, and slowly he lifted his arms and opened them wide. ‘It is a gift!’ he said.

Keller then continues, “The world before death—his old country—had forgotten Niggle almost completely, and there his work had ended unfinished and helpful to only a very few. But in his new country, the permanently real world, he finds that his tree, in full detail and finished, was not just a fancy of his that had died with him. No, it was indeed part of the True Reality that would live and be enjoyed forever.”

Finally, Keller writes,

If the God of the Bible exists, and there is a True Reality beneath and behind this one, and this life is not the only life, then every good endeavor, even the simplest ones, pursued in response to God’s calling, can matter forever. That is what the Christian faith promises. ‘In the Lord, your labor is not in vain,’ writes Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 58. He was speaking of Christian ministry, but Tolkien’s story shows how this can

ultimately be true of all work. Tolkien had readied himself, through Christian truth, for very modest accomplishment in the eyes of the world.

The story of "Leaf by Niggle" cuts me right to my core. As I was recounting the story to my wife just yesterday, I started to choke back tears. Even now, as I think about it more, the tears yet come. I imagine myself as Niggle, having passed on, yet seeing with new eyes the fulfillment of dreams unrealized. And now, as the kingdom of Christ already begins to break into the present, with new eyes I can already see the great value of sleeping on a rough cot beside the bed of your sick daughter. I can see the restoration of time spent changing diapers or a child's vomit-soaked bed-sheets. I can see the nobility in a fight to the death against a cancer diagnosis. And I can rest in the freedom of the knowledge that even if plans fail and the ship of ambition meets a fiery end on the rocky cliffs, there is inherent goodness in the effort anyway. Though life can often be unpleasant and suffering is always looming around the corner, there is still deep good in cultivating, living, and even enjoying life. Even the simplest things, if done in Christ and for the glory of God, are of deep value and worth.

I've often thought about the great Judgment that is to come, when all of the secrets of men will be brought to light by the omniscient, just Judge, Christ. His grading scale will be based on the heart that was behind the work. Were we producing as a result of being connected to the Vine? And the "last will be first, and the first last" (Matthew 20:16). Who will be the first? Most likely not those we have called such, or else this statement isn't striking at all. I like to imagine at times all those who have served in ages past, caring for the sick and the elderly, or sweating away under intense physical labor, or even pushing a broom in a small restaurant in the middle of nowhere. But if they did it with a heart of service to Christ, who is to say that these, forgotten by the world,

won't be the first in the kingdom to come? We will all find out together.