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# THE HAPPY PRINCE

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*John 15:9-17*



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Jesus loved to tell stories. Jesus wasn't like the Pharisees; they didn't know how to tell stories. The Pharisees were dull and pompous, filled with self-importance, no sense of humor. Jesus knew how to weave stories together. In fact, sometimes Jesus' whole sermon was a story. We know the parables of the prodigal son, and the Good Samaritan.

Throughout Christian tradition, preachers have often told a story as a full sermon. Not short illustrations. Not just insightful anecdotes. But a story as the sermon. I've done it a time or two.

So today's sermon is a story. Just as Jesus' stories were not children's stories, so the sermon for today is not a children's story but some of the children may enjoy it. It's a little longer than my usual sermon.

Today I have a story written by Oscar Wilde called *The Happy Prince*. Turns out it's a great commentary on today's Gospel: "No greater love has a person than this; that they lay down their life for their friends."

"High, high above the city on a column, at the very highest point of that city, was a statue of the happy prince. It was gilded in gold; with gold leaf from top to bottom of the statue. This statue glistened in the sun. On that statue, the happy prince was wearing a belt with a buckle, and there was a red ruby that was part of the buckle. There were two sparkling blue sapphires for the eyes.

This statue was incredibly beautiful and it glistened in the sun. Everybody who saw this statue enjoyed it and so everyone came by that hilltop park especially to see this glorious statue on the top of the highest hill in town. The town council people came to see it, and they were proud that their town had the finest statue in the country. ...

The children liked the statue because the children thought that the happy prince looked like an angel. The grown-ups liked the statue because they wanted their own children to be as contented and happy as the happy prince who was looking down on them.

Late one afternoon, on the edge of winter, a swallow came flying over that city on its way south to Egypt. That swallow was six weeks late. The swallow should have gone south six weeks previously, but the swallow was late in its journey and was looking for a place to stay that night. The swallow circled over the city and saw the statue of the happy prince, and came down and nestled in right between the feet of the statue. The swallow rested, there between the feet of the statue, for the night.

Well, as the swallow got rested up for the night and started to wiggle comfortably into its favorite resting positions, getting cozy and warm there; about that time the swallow felt a drop of water falling from above. The swallow looked up and said to himself, "The sky is clear. The moon is bright. The stars are out. Where is there a rain cloud?"

The swallow went back to sleep. Another of water landed on him. The swallow popped up and looked around and thought to himself, "What is wrong with the climate in this city? Is it so humid here that the sky is dripping drops of water?" The swallow went to sleep again. Then there was a third drop, and the swallow looked up again and there streaming out of the eyes of the statue of the happy prince were tears; streaming from his eyes and down his face and dripping onto the swallow.

As the swallow looked, he thought that the tears were so beautiful as they were shining against the golden skin in the moon glow. The swallow asked, "Who are you?"

The statue replied, "I am the happy prince."

"Well, if you are the happy prince, why are you crying?"

The happy prince said, "When I was a young boy, I lived down there in the village, down there in the great palace below, that palace that is surrounded by the high walls. I was the most happy of children. I live in that palace and I was so happy. All of my friends came into the palace; we danced together and we had a wonderful time. We went to the great hall at night and we played spirited games.

There was a big high wall all the way around it; you can see it if you look down there; and I was never let outside of the palace walls. I lived my total life inside the palace and my friends and I had so much fun together in the palace. We had so much fun together, if happiness be pleasure. We had great pleasure. ...

And then I died, and they made me into a statue and they put me on this tall pedestal on the highest hill of the city; and I look out over the whole city and I see all the houses of misery for the first time in my life. And so I weep, because of all the misery that I now see. I weep even if inside of me there is a lead heart and my lead heart weeps when I see the misery of the city. ...

And the swallow thought to himself, "Hmpf. Lead heart. I wondered if he was made of solid gold or not."

At this time, the happy prince said, "Swallow, swallow, little swallow, I look way into the far, far recesses of the city, and I can see into a window, and I can see a woman there

with a long drawn, gray, ashen face. Her hands are so worn, all pitted from decades of work with needles and sewing. I think she must be a seamstress. I see there in the window her son who is rolling and turning with a fever. The sick son is asking for oranges or something to help, and all she has to give him is water from the river.

“Swallow, little swallow, could you not stay one more night, and take my red ruby from my buckle and give it to the family so that they could buy food.”

“Absolutely not,” said the swallow. “I must go south. It is getting cold. We are on the edge of winter. I need to go south and go to the Valley of the Kings where it is warm. The swallows are there by the hundreds, the thousands, the hundreds of thousands, flying in and out of the hills and the valleys in the warmth of the desert sun.”

The happy prince again asked, “Swallow, little swallow, wouldn’t you stay with me for one more night and take my ruby to that sick and poor family?”

The swallow grumbled and groaned and said, “OK. I will.”

And so the swallow picked way and picked away and picked away at the red ruby. The next morning, the swallow flew high, high, high across the city, flying way up high past the spires of the cathedral where there were white marbled angels; and then flew out over the palace where he could hear the footsteps of marching guards; and then he flew past the masts of ships where there were lanterns banging against the halyards.

Finally, the swallow came to the window of the poor family. The window was open and the swallow flew in through the window, and there was the seamstress, her head on the table, the little boy hot with fever was in the bed. The swallow then softly dropped the beautiful red ruby right by the hand of the seamstress. The swallow went over near the little boy with the fever and started to flap his wings, and flap and flap and flap and flap, trying cool the air and reduce the temperature, by fanning the little boy.

Finally, the little boy became cooler and became less restless, and fell into a peaceful deep sleep. The swallow left. After the little swallow left, the seamstress woke up and said, “Oh, I have been visited by an angel who must have flown in through the window. God has been here.”

The swallow flew home; that is, back to the happy prince. The swallow flew over the spires of the cathedral with the white marble statues. A professor was there and he looked up and said, “That swallow should not be here. It is on the edge of winter. The other swallows were here and gone some six weeks ago. If that swallow stays here any longer, that swallow will die.”

The swallow flew back to the happy prince and said, "Happy prince. I must go south or I will die."

The happy prince said, "O swallow, little swallow, I am looking way across the city and I see across the city a young poet who has been busy trying to write, but his hands are so cold. He has mufflers on his fingers and there is no fire in the fireplace. The young poet is so depressed; I can see it in the lines of his face; he has given up hope. Swallow, little swallow, would you stay for one more night. Just one more night and take one of the sapphires from my eyes."

"No, I am not staying for one more night. I must go to Egypt. It is the edge of winter. Winter is almost here. In the land of the kings, there are wonderful pyramids where we swallows fly high and soar with the hundreds of thousands of other swallows."

"Swallow, little swallow, would you not stay with me for one more night and take the jewel from my eye and give it to the young poet?"

"OK."

The swallow worked on the sapphire all night long and finally got the jewel out. The next morning, the swallow flew high, high, high out over the spires of the cathedral with their white marble statues, over the palace where there were the sounds and sights of the marching guards; and over the masts of the ships on the river where the lamps were banging on the halyards.

The swallow flew in right where the young poet was asleep at the desk. He was freezing cold, and there was no coal for the fireplace. The swallow left the sapphire on the table near the frostbitten hands of the poet. The swallow flew away and the young poet woke up and said, "I have been visited by an angel. I have been visited by the Presence of God."

The swallow had flown away and had lit on one of the masts of the tall ships. A sailor looked up and said, "O no, there is a swallow up there on the mast. The swallow must go south or the swallow will die in the freezing snows that are soon coming."

The swallow came back to the happy prince and said, "I am going south, happy prince. Good bye, my new found friend."

The happy prince said, "Swallow, swallow, little swallow, could you not stay with me for one more night. For a see in the far distance a young match girl. I can see that she has dropped her matches and that they have gone into the gutter and into the drain. She was to

sell those matches in order to get money and now the matches are gone, and her father will beat her.

Swallow, swallow, little swallow, you need to help that girl. Would you not take my other eye out and give it to her?"

"But if you did that, happy prince, you would be blind."

"Swallow, swallow, little swallow, could you not stay with me for one..."

"No. I have to return to the warmth of the pyramids, to fly up and down with flocks of thousands of swallows in the warmth of the sun."

"Swallow, swallow ..."

"OK."

All night long, the swallow worked on that other eye so the other sapphire was finally loosened. The next morning, the swallow flew to the little match girl. She was sleeping on the edge of the gutter. All the pigeons were around her, and the swallow took the sapphire jewel and slipped it into her pocket.

When she woke up, she put her hands in her pockets to get them warm and she discovered some strange object in her pocket. She pulled out the beautiful sapphire and thought, "I will take this sapphire to my father and he won't beat me. I am so happy. I must have been visited by an angel."

The swallow returned to the happy prince and said, "I am going home."

The happy prince said, "I am so glad that you are going home. You need to go south and visit Egypt where it is warm."

The swallow said, "No, I am going home. I am going to the land of the dead. It is too late for me. I am going to die. But before I die, I want to tell you, happy prince, about the wonders of the world. About the camels and the caravans that traverse the Arabian Desert. About the long, narrow boats on the River Nile. I am going to tell you about the happiness of Egypt."

The happy prince replied, "*There is nothing so great as the mystery of misery.*"

The next day, the swallow flew high above the city to tell the happy prince what he, the swallow, saw. Without any eyes, the happy prince was now blind. He could not see. But the swallow could see for him, and the swallow saw all the starving children, all the hungry children of the streets below.

The swallow said, "What shall we do?"

The happy prince said, "Take off all of my gold, my skin, my gold leaf." So the swallow worked for days, for weeks, pick, pick, pick, and took off all the gold leaf and took it to the poor children in the city so they could buy food and clothing.

Now, there was nothing left. No jewels. No gold. And the swallow flew up and said to the happy prince, "I must go now, but I want to kiss you goodbye. The swallow flew up to kiss the happy prince on the lips. The swallow then came back to the nest between the feet and died. The moment that the swallow died, you could hear a large crack, as if a lead heart had been broken in two.

The next morning, the town counselors walked up to the top of their happy hill and said, "What has happened to our statue of the happy prince? That statue looks terrible as if it is a piece of unkempt junk. And what is that dead bird at its feet? How disgusting."

The town counselors took the dead bird and threw it out into the dump and the mayor said, "Take that statue and get rid of it. Take it to the foundry and melt it down."

So they took that statue to the foundry and they melted it down. They put the statue into the hottest furnace, but when the melting process was over, the operator of the foundry discovered that there was a cracked lead heart that would not be melted down. So the man took that cracked lead heart and threw it out into the dump, and it landed right next to a dead swallow.

Time passed. The Lord God, sitting in heaven, watching the whole situation, said to an angel, "I want you, my angel, to fly down to that city and bring back to me the two most valuable jewels in that city."

The angel sped with the speed of light through space and came to that city and came to that dump and picked up the body of the dead swallow and also the lead heart and brought them back to God.

God said to his angel, "You have chosen correctly. For the swallow shall sing forever and the happy prince shall be happy in my kingdom."

Jesus said it, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this...."

Amen.