

I'd like to tell y'all another wild family story, but before you think you're off the hook from a heady theological sermon, hold tight. There's some good stuff coming at the end. Now, I'm not usually one to hold up my dad as exemplary sermon fodder, but I actually think the events of this week help us get to where we need to be headin', so here goes. Many of you know my dad is a veterinarian. He's spent the bulk of his days around critters of all kinds, doing work most of us would rather steer well clear of for the animals we love and sometimes make our living off of. My grandpa was a vet, too, so even before dad had the chance to go to school to learn his trade, he got all kinds of hands-on experience in clinics and paddocks and trailer beds. Over the years, I've seen all manner of creature great and small in his care, from lizards to llamas to killer emus and all the way down to chows that couldn't get their nails done without a sedative. His office is filled with bottles of formaldehyde and medical oddities he's removed, like the creepy backroom of a carnival sideshow. I've seen him eat barbeque, work a crossword puzzle, and perform surgery all at the same table, almost always washed down between activities. I learned one of my most useful lessons with him, that no matter what, you can't fall off the floor. This has saved many a coffee mug and sedated kitten. Some of my fondest memories come from working at his side, and frankly, some of my hardest ones, too. But one thing I know for certain: my dad, just like my uncle on the other side, and on my worse days, just like me, my dad has a tendency to play a version of Russian Roulette when he deals with all those critters. I've never actually seen him get bit by a dog, but I've seen him in some tight spots with a stallion and a stall, or a heifer and a chute, or a heifer and a calf, or a heifer and a wide open field that somehow managed to get him cornered when there weren't any corners around!

But this past week, that game of roulette, and maybe a few years of lucky turns, finally caught up with him. This past week, y'all, my dad got attacked by the family bull. He's ok, a good bit worse for wear, but he's on his feet. Well, foot. He's been put back together again like an Ikea bookshelf, complete with plate and screws, so he'll be hobbled and limited to a walker for a good while. Something in the bull just switched, and dad was unlucky enough to be there when it did. He's lucky, as odd as it sounds to say that, he's lucky that the bull wasn't old enough to have horns just yet. Today may have been a very different day. But here's the thing. Even if my dad was the most careful, OSHA-abiding vet the world had ever known, and he's not, there's always a risk something like this could've happened. Everytime he puts on that short-sleeved, blue button up and khakis -- the closest thing he has to a uniform -- everytime he suits up and goes to work, he bears a risk that something might go wrong. And for him, when something goes wrong, there's a chance a ton of muscle is what's going wrong on the other side. Being a vet isn't cheap.

But all this made me really grateful for some of the choices I've made in life. Much as I love a critter, I'm kinda glad I don't often run into deranged animals out for revenge. I don't have a lot of physical risk in my work. That doesn't mean my work is cheap, it's just different. But thank God. The more I've been thinking about all this, though, the more I'm realizing just how much closer to these sorts of moments we are than we often realize. Back in the day, a violent encounter with a bull or a hard scabble, every-day's-a-gamble kind of existence would've been the norm. Relatively cushy lives like many of ours would've been a lot harder to come by. The biggest fear of physical danger I have most days is about how many papercuts I'd get if the printer got testy. I'm not all that worried about bulls or bears or other beasties stalking from the pages of the brothers Grimm.

You know, I don't spend a whole lot of time talking about Jesus on the cross. Frankly, it's hard for me to put my focus there. I'm much more of a "so what" kinda guy. I want to acknowledge all that happened and then get on with how I'm supposed to live because of it. Come Holy Week and Good Friday, I'll hold my gaze on

those beams of wood a little longer, but most of the time? Most of the time my heart can't stand to look for too long. I just can't stand to look at what people are capable of, to be reminded of the failing of humanity when God came among us in the person of Jesus. Because I know there's a part of me that lands him there, and even knowing that, I'm not 100% confident that, if he were to come again tomorrow, I wouldn't do it again. When Isaiah talks about his Suffering Servant, we can't help but hear Jesus in what he says. Isaiah points our eyes in that direction, and he doesn't let us look away. "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, and by his bruises, we are healed." Y'all, I don't like to look at that. I don't. It grieves my soul and it troubles my mind. And yet. It has been done. Of course I appreciate it, but I don't want to look.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has an extraordinary reflection on this idea in his book "The Cost of Discipleship." It's a long quote here, but it bears repeating in full. He's talking about what he calls "cheap grace," or the temptation of modern people to enjoy the benefits of Christianity without bearing the responsibility that comes with it. He says,

"Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be if it were not cheap?...Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price for which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'ye were bought at a price,' and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."

I suppose I bring Bonhoeffer into a story about my dad and a bull gone wild because there's a reminder there of the things I take for granted, maybe the things y'all take for granted, too. I suspect we each know a wild story or a brush with mortality like this one, something so bizarre and maybe even kind of anachronistic that it doesn't seem like it could happen in our day and age. And maybe there's a reminder there in that sudden and shocking moment, there is a cheapness to how easy it is to live life coasting, and how suddenly a cost paid can turn a life around.

Now, I don't know just how my dad's going to recover from all this. Asking him to stay put for 6 weeks may be worse than the initial encounter with the bull. His doctor told him, "Just don't do anything stupid" knowing that he probably will. There's all sorts of questions up in the air. But I know this. After talking with him a few days ago, he's well aware of God these days, and he's acutely aware of what being the suffering

servant feels like down in his beat up bones. He knows the cost, maybe a bit more than I do these days. It's no easier to look at the cross after a week like this one. It's just not. But I take some solace in knowing that the gift remains, that costliest of gifts offered freely to us but at great price to its holy giver. But that's God's love for us, the grace offered in spite of our own failings. The prayer I've been praying this week is to have the strength to look a little longer at the cross, to receive the grace there, and hopefully honor its cost in how I live. It's not cheap, but it is grace.