

“RAGS TO RICHES”

Pastor Mike Corwin

Text: Romans 5:6-11 God’s Word: Isaiah 53:1-6

I - WALTER WANGERIN JR:

Walter Wangerin Jr. is the son of a Lutheran Pastor who grew up in different locations as his dad served various churches. He went to college and got his master of divinity degree but did not become a pastor. Instead he teaches literature, theology, and creative writing at Valparaiso University in Indiana.

He is the author of over 30 books - including children's books and writes mostly about religion. I recently read a book he wrote called "THE RAGMAN AND OTHER CRIES OF FAITH." The lead story in the book was titled simply "Ragman." It was so powerful that I wanted to share it with you today. Listen as I read it and some of the congregation gives you a visual following of this story...

II - RAGMAN:

I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for.

Hush, child. Hush, now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice: “Rags!” Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

“Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!”

“Now, this is a wonder,” I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city?

I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn’t disappointed.

Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

“Give me your rag,” he said so gently, “and I’ll give you another.”

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then HE began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

“This IS a wonder,” I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

“Rags! Rags! New rags for old!”

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart.

“Give me your rag,” he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, “and I’ll give you mine.”

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood – his own!

“Rags! Rags! I take old rags!” cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

“Are you going to work?” he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head.

The Ragman pressed him: “Do you have a job?”

“Are you crazy?” sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket – flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

“So,” said the Ragman. “Give me your jacket, and I’ll give you mine.”

Such quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman – and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman’s arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

“Go to work,” he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, and old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I needed to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so.

The little old Ragman – he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. And then I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope – because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know – how could I know? – that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night, too.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence.

Light – pure, hard, demanding light – slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the last and the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that, healthy! There was no sign of sorrow nor of age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: “Dress me.”

He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!

III - THE STORY OF SALVATION:

This story is the vivid picture of what Jesus did for us. He came to make us whole. When sin had separated us from the face of God. When sin stood between us and the full relationship our Maker wanted to have with his children, he sent his one and only Son to take care of it.

He traveled the earth and gave us a prelude to what he was about to do as touched the lives of people and healed them. He drove out demons, he gave sight to the blind, he made the lame get up and walk, he stopped blood flow from a woman, he cured the lepers and he had mercy on and fed the masses who came to see and hear him. But his greatest miracle was yet to come. The prophet Isaiah said that this man would take all our pain and sorrow upon himself. He had

all of our sins laid on him and took our punishment. He touched the lives of all those who had ever lived or ever would. Because of him...we are healed!

IV - TEXT:

The Author of the book of Romans put it this way...

Romans 5:6-11 (NLT)

⁶When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. ⁷Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. ⁹And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. ¹⁰For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. ¹¹So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God.

God sent his grace to us in the flesh of his Son. The Son who took all the sins of humanity, past-present-future onto that flesh and had them nailed to the cross with him. When he died the curse of our sin died with him. Three days later when he rose again- the hope of our own resurrection was born. And we are supposed to rejoice in it! God, through Jesus has made us whole again and we are forgiven and restored. Glory - Hallelujah! We've been transformed by the cross of Jesus from the rags of our human sins to the riches of our future with God!

V - SPREAD THE RICHES:

So now what do we do with this overwhelming grace? How do we live out our thanksgiving and love for God and his Son Jesus.

It's pretty easy: First we give God thanks for his grace and our forgiveness. Then we live in that grace and don't go back to our sinful ways. We don't cheapen his sacrifice by claiming it but not living it.

But the last part is a little harder. We become the Ragman. Through the power of Jesus Christ his church fills in for him today. We travel outside, we do everything we can to heal those who have pain and suffering and through the power of The Gospel story we take away their sinful rags and give to them the riches of Salvation.

The story of the ragman goes on...

AMEN

