

SOCIAL FOOTPRINTS

People don't usually know exactly when their baby is to be born. Yes, doctors give expectant mothers due dates—and sometimes they are right. But often, they're off by days—even weeks. My mother tells me I was induced—three week after her due date! I've had trouble being on time ever since!

But when there is a planned c-section involved, doctors can predict the day and even the time. Such was the case with our newest granddaughter. April 10th, her parents were told, somewhere round 11:00 AM.

So it was that after my daughter-in-law Michelle was settled in, Linda and I, along with Michelle's mother, waited in the hospital cafeteria as she gave birth.

Just as our coffee was getting cold, our son Bruce walked up to our table—he was beaming. Megan Rose had arrived on the scene at 11:16. She weighed in at 7 pounds, 11 ounces. And, of course, she was beautiful.

We scurried to the elevator, and made our way up to the recovery room. And just forty-five minutes after she was born, saw Megan for the first time.

As we gazed at her lying in her bassinet, she wriggled a bit. She still had on some of the post natal monitors. Some of the detris of the birthing process still clung to her tiny chest. And as we looked at her feet, they were light blue.

Rather alarmed, Linda asked, "Has she got a circulation problem?"

Michelle laughed, "No, Oma, that's from taking her footprints for the records."

Feeling a bit foolish, we both sighed with relief, and then continued with our gushing over the perfect baby. Amazing how all four of our grandchildren have been perfect babies!

Later, though, I got to thinking about those tiny footprints. Now they are not much more than an inch long! And while it will be fun to watch Megan grow, and to follow the development of her feet—indeed her whole physical self--what really intrigues me are all the possibilities that may lie ahead for her. Who will this little one become? Who will she grow up to be? What will she do? For now, she's made her mark on some papers at Winnie Palmer Hospital in Orlando. Twenty, thirty, forty years from now, what sort of mark will she make on the world? What sort of footprints will she leave behind?

The man who approaches Jesus in our story from Mark appears concerned about the mark he's making. He is obviously rich, but the other gospels give a couple of other details about him as well. Luke tells us he is a ruler—probably a leader in the synagogue. And Matthew tells us he was young. He is, in other words, in a position of power and wealth.

Often, in our world, it is the powerful and the wealthy who we assume make a real difference. They are the ones we find in history books. They are the ones who leave a real mark on the world—for good or for ill. But this young man has a nagging sense that there must be more to life than making money or having control over many people.

The text makes it clear that he obeyed the Torah—the Jewish Law—but even that seems to be somehow lacking for him.

So he goes to Jesus, and asks his opinion. “Teacher,” he says, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Now the reality is that the Greek here could be better rendered in another way. For while Christians have had a historic concern about the afterlife, through the centuries it has not been a primary issue for most Jews.

This young man is not asking “how do I get to heaven”—no, he is asking, “how can I live life as God would have me live it?” Brian McLaren writes, “The phrase ‘eternal life’ (*zoein aionian* in the Greek) would be better translated ‘life of the ages’ meaning . . . ‘life in the kingdom of God.’” (*Everything Must Change*, 96)

Remember, the kingdom of God, for Jesus, is all about the here and now, not just the then and there. We are called to be citizens of God's kingdom in this life, not just the next. We are called to live under God's reign today, not just in some distant future. And it is to that kingdom that we must have our first allegiance.

How, he is asking, how can I best live as a citizen of God's kingdom?

No doubt, he is shocked by Jesus' answer. For Jesus perceives that as long as the young man possesses great wealthy, great wealth will possess the young man. He will not be able to live under God's reign, for his first loyalty will be to amassing and keeping his material possessions. He will not be able to follow God's rule, because he will be following the rules of profits and growth.

“Sell whatever you have,” says Jesus, “and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”—that way you'll truly make your mark, then set down some new footprints, and follow me.

Only as he is willing to let go of his overriding concerns about his own well-being, only as he is willing to show real, deep, abiding concern about others, especially the poor, only then will he live God's way. As McLaren later writes: "The way of the kingdom of God calls people to a higher concern than self or national interest: namely, concern for the common good" (Ibid, 208)

Scott Neeson, the former president of 20th Century Fox, seems to live that ethic.

Earlier this decade he lived the charmed life. He had a five bedroom home in Brentwood, a yacht, a great sports car. He had a job with real power and real prestige.

"I sort of enjoyed it," he says, "but I wasn't particularly happy." (*The Life of Meaning*, 390)

But then, on a hiking vacation in Cambodia in 2003, he encountered hundreds and hundreds of street urchins, little kids, dressed in rags, begging for food, for money, for anything.

At first, he responded as many Westerners do, with modest handouts. But soon he realized such tokens made little impact.

So eventually, he decided to use his resources in a more strategic way. He left his job, moved to Phenom Phen, and established the Cambodian Children's Fund. Part school, part children's home, the Fund provides a safe place for kids to get enough to eat, clothes to wear, a roof over their heads and most importantly, perhaps, an education.

Eventually Scott moved to Cambodia. "I've sold everything," he says, "[And] I've never been happier in my life. Every day is an emotional roller coaster, but I get up early in the morning, and I can't wait to go to work." (Ibid, 392)

Scott Neeson is making his mark, he is living by the rule of the kingdom, placing the common good above self gain.

Rajiv Vinnakoto has done a similar thing. He gave up a budding career as a management consultant to start the SEED School. Located in one of the poorest sections of Washington, SEED operates as a boarding school for local children, giving DC kids a real chance to finish high school and go on to college.

As he wrestled with his decision to change direction, he looked at his position as a management consultant, where he helped folks amass more and more wealth, and he had serious concerns. He told a reporter: "[T]hat's not the social footprint I want to leave" (Ibid, 396)

So perhaps it comes down to this: how are you claiming your citizenship in the kingdom of God? What's your social footprint? You needn't be wealthy or powerful to make a

difference. God calls all people to live for others. So what will you need to do to get in step with the reign of God? What changes might you need to make to truly place God's concern for all people first in your life?

For most of us it will not entail selling off everything and changing careers. But it will involve changes. It will involve a careful reexamination of priorities.

Early in my sabbatical time away we rejoiced in the birth of Megan Rose. Just Friday, our last day away, we rejoiced in the celebration of my mother and father-in-laws sixty-sixth wedding anniversary.

They are both in a nursing home now in upstate New York. Both of them are largely confined to wheelchairs. Neither of them can walk unassisted—and my father –in-law requires two people to even shuffle from his bed to his chair. Megan's footprints, other than inky ones on paper, are yet to be made. But Cyril and Hazel's are largely laid down already. Their literal footprints, and the figurative ones as well.

And they have made a mark. Each in their own way. These two good folks, who've been married longer than most of us have been alive, have left a social footprint for the good. Hazel has used crochet hooks and knitting needles to create dozens of shawls to bless the shoulders of those needing prayers, and blankets for babies being baptized. And through the years she has crafted hundreds of caps and mittens for homeless and needy men, women and children, keeping them warm in the long, cold winters of New York. And over the years Cyril put in untold hours volunteering at his churches, including this one, and for many years delivering meals and a cheery smile to homebound seniors.

They weren't rich. They weren't powerful. Cyril made a living as a factory worker and chauffeur. Hazel was a glove maker and mother. But in these, and many other ways, they made their marks. They worked for the common good. They cared about others. And so they've left a social footprint of note. They have lived their lives as citizens of the kingdom of God.

So what about you? What about me? What about our congregation? How will we best live as citizens of the kingdom of God? How will we give of ourselves in service to others and contribute to the common good? What kind of social footprint will you leave behind?

Amen

John H Danner