

Over the last month or so, you may have seen previews for the movie *Roofman* with Channing Tatum. If you take the trailer at face value, it seems like just kind of a feel good, fun movie. Random guy ends up secretly living in a Toys R Us where he plays with toys and roller skates through the aisles at night. However, when you see it, you realize that the story is much bigger than that, and is, in fact, based on a true story.

*Roofman* is the story of Jeffrey Manchester. Jeffrey was an Army vet who upon returning from a deployment overseas faces nothing but set backs. He's divorced but wants to provide for his kids and continue taking care of them, giving them everything they could possibly want. He decides to put his unique skill set to use by robbing McDonald's. His MO was to break in through the roof of the building, put the employees in the freezer, take the money, and then call the cops on his way out so that the employees were rescued. On several occasions, employees stated that he made sure they had their coats or even gave them his so that they wouldn't be too cold. It's not quite a Robin Hood situation, but he was doing this with the least amount of violence possible. Ultimately, he gets arrested and is sentenced to 45 years in prison, but of course, pretty ingeniously, he escapes from prison.

He ends up hiding out at a local Toys R Us, building a homey, little, hidey hole inside one of their hallow displays and pretty much getting away

unnoticed. One day, he hears through the camera system that he has bugged that there one of the employees is running a toy drive at her church and asks her boss for donations, which he immediately and harshly shuts down. So Jeffrey decides to sneak out early one morning with a bunch of toys to discreetly drop off. Well, best laid plans. A woman at the church sees him, however, she doesn't recognize who he is, she invites him into their service, and well, the roller coaster really begins.

The church community gets to know him as John Zorn. No one recognizes him as the Roofman, and he starts building relationships. He falls in love, he spends time in this community, and they care for him. Eventually, inevitably, this all entirely falls apart and long story short, he ends up back in prison with another 40 year sentence. At the end of the movie, they played interviews with the real people involved and the one that stuck out to me was the pastor. He went to visit Jeffrey frequently, maintaining that relationship. He said most people expected him to write him off, condemn him, never speak of him again, but he doesn't. He was like, he was a good guy while he was with us, obviously flawed and made bad decisions, but he was no less deserving of love and grace. As I listened to his response, it felt a little bit like he was experiencing what Jesus describes in our gospel today, don't prepare a defense in advance, you will

be given a chance to testify, and God will give you the right words to say that no one will be able to contradict or withstand, because who was going to tell this pastor that he shouldn't visit a lonely man in prison?

We need some context to figure out what's going on here between Jesus and the disciples. We are deep in the thick of the post-Palm Sunday days. They are in Jerusalem and you have to imagine things are packed. Thousands of people descending on the city and yet somehow, the authorities keep finding Jesus. There have been conversations about the resurrection, about paying taxes, about whether or not he is from David's line. Jesus has flipped tables over in the Temple and so you have to imagine that the temperature in the proverbial room is reaching a boiling point. Things are tense and anxious and everyone is on high alert.

I kind of like to imagine that one of the disciples operates how I tend to when things are anxious. Let's distract and try to get everyone to pay attention to something warm and fuzzy!! Look at how beautiful the Temple is!! Sure Jesus might have just lost his mind in there, but it's still so pretty. Look at the stones, look at what people have dedicated to God, isn't everything so nice?! And Jesus...well, Jesus just does not have time for that noise. You see those stones? You see this building? Yeah, it's all going to

be destroyed eventually, everything is going to fall apart and be chaotic. So much for calming things down!

And Jesus just keeps going! He tells them that there is going to be all sorts of chaos that is going to happen BUT they shouldn't freak out. This is what is *supposed* to happen. Not exactly the most comforting words, but ok. He tells them they're going to be arrested and persecuted but that's ok! Because it's going to give them a chance to testify, but they don't need to plan their words out in advance, the Holy Spirit will give them words to say that no one can fight back against. It was this part of the text that got my wheels turning because...what is about to happen to Jesus? He is going to get arrested, he is going to be asked to testify in front of Herod and Pilate, and yet...when given that opportunity, what message does he preach? He doesn't fight back with big, long theological treatises, he doesn't tell a parable like he usually does, he simply stands firm in who he is. They say he is a king, but he knows his kingdom is from above. They demand answers from him and he only gives them love, grace, and steadfastness in return. He refuses to let them bend his words to their whims, he doesn't try to convince them of anything, he simply remains who he is and extends words of grace and love. Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. Those are the words the Holy Spirit gave to him. And that got me

thinking...when the world goes crazy, when everything feels off-kilter, what if the words God gives to us to testify is simply one word: love?

So often when faced with disagreement, be it about faith or any of other myriad things in this life we can all disagree about, our instinct is to fight back, to go on the offense, to defend our position, filibuster our topic to death until the other person backs down. We're more focused on winning the argument than anything else, and we are so bound and determined to think that we're right, to justify ourselves in our rightness that we think no matter what God must be on our side, so we just keep arguing and arguing. We think, Jesus said we will receive wisdom no one can refute and so it must be what we're arguing, but what if the ultimate wisdom has nothing to do with our position about anything, but is in fact the boundless, grace-filled love that Jesus showed in the face of his own opponents?

When faced with the chaos of the world, with someone saying something you so ardently disagree with, it takes a lot, a great deal of strength and assurance in oneself to be able to meet that with kindness, with love. And over and over again we see Jesus doing this in his own life. He's not above a good discussion and dispute, but he also doesn't sacrifice love and seeing the other person as a beloved child of God just to win a debate. At the end of the day, Jesus' baseline was always love God and love your

neighbor, and let God take care of the rest. God isn't looking to us to take care of judgment or critique or commentary on another's sins, God is looking to us to do exactly what we pray for every week, when the pastor doesn't forget it, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, to make the kingdom of heaven here on earth, and that's not going to be done with boisterous arguing, shouting down another person, but with love and grace and the hope that at the end of the day our shared personhood is something that can create bonds of hope.

Our time and our energy are some of the most precious things that we have, and we get to choose how we expend those things, and which do we think God would prefer we used those things on? Love or hatred? Now! This is *not* to say that this is a call to be a doormat, to give up on the fight for justice and standing up for our neighbor—both of those things are also centered deeply and intrinsically in love, love is the bedrock of justice, but that becomes the key question we have to ask ourselves when we are entering into these spaces. Am I about to take up this argument because it's what is right, what is good for my neighbor, what is going to allow God's justice to roll down like a mighty water, or am I taking it up because *I* want to be right, because I want to hear my own voice, and because I just want this person to lose? Is what I'm saying centered in *God's* wisdom or just

what I want to think is God's voice? They are hard questions to ask ourselves, but they are vital in a world in which everyone and their brother, sister, and mother are claiming they know exactly what God is thinking.

We should not think for one second that if Jesus had chosen to, he could have defeated Pilate and Herod both a hundred times over in a battle of wits, wisdom, and words, but instead he stayed true to who he knew he was created to be, who he knew he was in God's eyes. That sometimes is the ultimate wisdom, not shouting down our opponents, but knowing who we are and *whose* we are, and staying true to that, staying true to knowing that we are a beloved child of God in the same way that the person we want to argue with is, and standing firm in love and grace. It's not easy. I would imagine the disciples wanted to know what the magic word was going to be to get them out of prison and danger, but Jesus has already shown them all the words that they need. Love your neighbor as yourself. The world doesn't need every word that is in our heads, but it does need every ounce of love and grace that we can extend. It's not always the flashiest thing to do, it isn't always the most comfortable thing to do, most of the time we just want to yell and scream...but when the world expects chaos, hatred, and turning our back on our siblings...dare to do the wise thing, dare to love, dare to forgive, dare to give another the grace you have been given. **AMEN!**