

04.21.2019
Easter Sunday
"Ragman"

Rev. David V. Miller (based on Walter Wangerin, Jr.)
Lutheran Church of the Ascension
Atlanta, GA

Just recently, I experienced something so strange, so amazing, it's tough to put into words. But if you'll just give me a few minutes of your time, I'll try my best. Just last Friday, before the sun had even come up yet, I saw this man. He was a handsome, strong man, and he was making his way through the back alleys of this city. Behind him, he was pulling this old cart piled high with bright, new clothes. And as he went about, he was calling out loud and clear, "Rags! Rags! New rags for old! Gimme your tired rags!"

Now, these streets stunk with the rotten stench of this cruel world. But when I heard that man call out, "Rags!" there was a sweetness that filled the air like the morning after a cleansing rain. "Rags! New Rags for old! Gimme your tired rags! New rags!" he kept calling out—his voice bouncing off buildings and echoing through the streets.

Huh, what is this? I wondered as the rising sun began to shine on this figure. Able to see him better, I could make out that he was a large man, tall too—about 6' 4"—and his arms were huge like tree branches. And when his eyes flashed, I could see in them a deep kind of wisdom. *What was he doing here? Where is he going? Nobody recycles rags anymore, and even if they did couldn't a man like him do better than this?*

My curiosity got the best of me—I just couldn't resist. I had to follow him—I had to find out! And sure enough, I wasn't disappointed.

Before too long, this ragman paused in front of some house. He'd spotted this woman there, sitting out on the porch. She looked sad—you could tell she was weeping as she held a handkerchief close to her face. Her body was rocking back and forth, the way people do after their heart breaks.

Quietly, the ragman stepped around the litter in her front yard—empty cans of formula, dead toys, useless diapers—and walked up her porch steps. When he got to the woman, he said gently, "Gimme your rag." Still sniffing, she looked up at him with a look of confusion. Then, kneeling down beside her, again he said, "Gimme your rag, and I'll give you another." The ragman reached out, and taking hold of her handkerchief, he used it one more time to dry the tears from her cheeks. Finally, pulling out a fresh, new linen cloth, he laid it across her hand. She was stunned, looking down at the clean handkerchief, then up at this stranger.

But that's not even the strange part. You see, before he went back to pulling his cart, the ragman put her old, stained handkerchief up to his own face. And as he did, he himself began weeping, sobbing so violently even—like the woman just had—that his shoulders were shaking and his body was rocking. I looked back at the woman, and was surprised to find not a single tear left on her face, her shoulders now held high. Her only expression now was one of wonder at what had just happened.

Wow, this is really something! I thought. At this point, I couldn't tear myself away from the sobbing ragman. He kept moving, and I could swear he'd picked up his pace now. "Rags! Rags! New rags for old!" he was calling out again. But now that loud, clear voice, was shaky with emotion as he was overcome with sadness—"Rags!"

By this time, it was light enough to make out the shredded curtains and damaged blinds that hung in the dark windows. And as the ragman walked on, he came upon a little girl sitting on the curb. Her head was wrapped in a bandage, her eyes were vacant like the windows behind her, and from under the bandage a line of blood was running down her face.

Overcome with compassion, the ragman could go no farther. Digging his hands into his cart, he drew out a beautiful yellow hat and walked over to the girl. "Gimme your rag," he said as he traced his own line on her cheek, "and I'll give you mine." The child could only stare blankly ahead as he loosened her bandage, and then tied it around his own head. What I saw next though took my breath away—with the bandage went the girl's wound, but the ragman's own head now began to bleed. And as he placed the yellow hat on her head, the girl's dull eyes started to sparkle with life. With those same eyes, she looked with wonder as the ragman rose up unsteadily to his feet and shuffled back to his cart.

“Rags! Rags! Old rags for new!” the strong, wise ragman cried out again, this time sobbing, bleeding. The sun now was high in the sky, as the ragman seemed to pull his cart faster and faster. He nearly bumped into a man leaning against a phone pole. “Are you going to work?” the ragman asked. The man just shook his head. “Don’t you have a job?” the ragman pressed. “Are you crazy?” the man sneered, pulling away from the phone pole to reveal the right sleeve of his jacket. There it hung loose, flat, empty—no arm to fill it.

“Gimme your jacket,” the ragman insisted, “and I’ll give you mine.” The one-armed man was reluctant at first, but—not having anything to lose—he slowly slipped his jacket off while the ragman took off his. I had to look twice after what I saw next. The ragman’s arm stayed in the sleeve of his jacket, and when the other man put it on he had two good arms—thick as tree branches. I looked at the ragman again, and sure enough, he only had one left. “Now, you’re ready to work,” the ragman said, moving back to his cart.

This time, he was really struggling to pull it—couldn’t have been easy with just one arm. Still, there was an urgency in his step, like he had somewhere he needed to be. But soon, lying in his path, was a passed out old drunk. He lay underneath a well-worn army blanket—the man was hunched over, withered, sickly. Lightly, the ragman picked up the blanket and pulled it around himself. And for the drunk, a stack of new clothes was left waiting.

Now, as the ragman moved on, I had to really run to keep up. Here he was weeping uncontrollably, bleeding from his forehead, his one arm struggling with the cart, and now stumbling about from drunkenness. He was in bad shape—old and sick—but he could still go at incredible speed. Block after block, mile after mile, went the ragman.

Seeing the ragman hurt like this, watching him change so, made my heart ache. I could barely take any more—I was tempted to turn back. But still, I had to find out what will happen next. The prospect of learning how this story ends drove me to keep following.

The once strong ragman was now aged and frail—his body wracked with pain, shaking with sorrow, and fraught with disease. I watched as he came to an old abandoned lot filled with stacks of trash, old furniture, rusted out shells of cars and tired equipment. He moved through garbage pits and piles of refuse. Finally, he climbed a hill heaped up with the debris left from a thousand different lives. Scrambling higher and higher, he struggled to pull his burdensome cart behind him. With tormented labor, he cleared a small space at the top of the mound.

Exhausted, he sluggishly made a bed with the contents of his cart. When he was through, he collapsed into it. The handkerchief and jacket were his pillow. The army blanket, he pulled over his aching bones. His body shivered under the load of injury, pain, and illness. His eyes wept, and the wound under his bandage still flowed red. With a deep moan and a heavy sigh, he closed his eyes and became motionless. No longer did I see his chest move up and down. I then knew he was gone from this world.

Oh, how I cried at his death! It was all I could do to find an old, abandoned car where I could mourn in private. Alone in that junker, I just lost it. That ragman had done so much good—worked so many wonders and changed so many lives. It felt so unfair for it to end like this, especially after he’d offered such hope to the broken people of this city. But he was no more now—I sobbed myself to sleep.

This all happened on a Friday—did I mention that? And I guess I’d been so tired with grief, because it wasn’t until very early Sunday morning that I woke up. I was startled to hear the stirring and clattering that came from the top of that trash heap. Looking up, there was a light beaming so bright it forced me to squint. It warmed my tear-stained face and immediately gave me a jolt. Because standing there, right where he’d laid down for the last time, was none other than the ragman himself—shining like the sun in full strength. He was alive again! But this time, there was no sign of sorrow or age, or illness or deformity—He looked better than ever before! He was just standing there proudly, neatly folding up the old army blanket, and gently laying it beside the handkerchief and jacket, all neatly arranged. Even those old rags now shined with a purity and cleanness like they’d never had.

04.21.2019
Easter Sunday
"Ragman"

Rev. David V. Miller (based on Walter Wangerin, Jr.)
Lutheran Church of the Ascension
Atlanta, GA

Tears of joy filled my eyes, a peace I'd never known before came over me. I thought he'd died and all hope had died with him. But now, now I just knew everything was going to be alright. Nervously, I dared to approach him. Trembling, I put one foot in front of the other until I got to the ragman.

Mustering up some courage, I told him who I was. I said I had lots of shame, told him I was sorry for the way I'd spent my life. Then, with deep yearning in my soul, I asked him if he could dress me too. And taking my used rags—worn through and dirty from a life of regret—my Lord put me in new clothes—fresh ones, proud ones, glorious ones!

That's what he did for me, and that's what he can do for you. That's the ragman . . . that's the Christ!