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Proper 26C / Reformation
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Luke 19:1-10

NEVER TOO LATE

The final leg of his journey to Jerusalem takes Jesus through Jericho where he encounters first a blind beggar and then, a man named Zacchaeus, leaving them both forever changed. These are stories that speak of the change God can bring to our lives when we're ripe for it.

Today I want to share another story about change—transformation really; a "re-formation" of soul—that came to the life of one man who'd long been set in his ways.

Clarence J. Tommersdahl the Third was no saint. In fact, during the 20+ years he'd lived in Franklin Grove, he'd earned a reputation as a shrewd and heartless businessman. He'd moved to the small town from Chicago, after buying Swensen's Hardware, a store that had been in the Swensen family for three generations.

No one knew much about him, but they got an inkling of what he was like when workmen showed up one Sunday, pulled the "SWENSEN'S HARDWARE" sign off the building's facade, and put up a new sign "TOMMERSDAHL HARDWARE." It took people a little getting used to, but they did, and it's a good thing, because within ten years two other Main Street businesses bore the same name: Tommersdahl Drug and Tommersdahl Grocery.

If you can imagine a vulture dressed in a suit—that was Clarence J. Tommersdahl the Third. His business strategy was as straightforward as it was unrelenting. He would acquire the lease on a store he was interested in, often working through a third party; then, gradually raise the rent to apply some pressure. When a business was in competition with one he already owned, he'd lower his prices, forcing them to follow suit, until their profit margin disappeared altogether. Then, he'd make a generous offer for the inventory they held, and soon his name would be up on the storefront.

In 10 years he'd acquired three businesses; in 15 years, four; and in this, his 20th year in Franklin Grove, he was looking to score number five – the feed and seed store on the north edge of town. And yet, for all the weight he threw around in that small town economy, Clarence J. Tommersdahl the Third remained mostly a mystery.

Once every year or so, he'd show up at church, catching folks by surprise, but his habit was to arrive after the first hymn and to leave before the last. As far as anyone could tell, whatever faith life he had was thoroughly private. Business and religion seemed mutually exclusive endeavors.

Since managers ran the day-to-day operations at his stores, the only time you could count on seeing him was at the end of each month when he drove into town in his long, black Cadillac Fleetwood. Starting at one end of town and moving gradually to the other, he'd meet with each store manager and evaluate each bottom line.

To the children who crossed his path, he was an imposing and ominous presence. One look from him and you felt like you'd been caught with your hand in the cookie jar. And that's how things were until the day his life was turned around.

It was the last Saturday in September, and Tommersdahl was coming into town to make another offer on Jansen's Seed & Feed Store. It would be the third time he'd approached the owner, Fred Jansen, about selling. In their first conversation, two years before, Fred told Mr. Tommersdahl he wasn't the

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least bit interested in selling. He was a good twenty years from retirement and he had a going business supplying the farmers in the area. He and his wife Mary had just enrolled their daughter, Katie, at the elementary school. They loved Franklin Grove—there was no reason for him to sell.

Nine months later, Mary's doctor discovered a cyst during an examination. A biopsy at the medical center in Rockford showed it was benign. But they decided to have it removed nonetheless. Everything went fine. Mary was recuperating at home, being tenderly waited on by daughter, Katie, when Tommersdahl stopped by the second time to see Fred. This time, he upped his offer twenty grand.

"MEDICAL BILLS CAN PUT QUITE A DRAIN ON A FAMILY'S FINANCES," he said.
Fred shook his head. "WE'LL MANAGE JUST FINE," he answered.

And the Jensen's did do fine. Mary recovered quickly. Things returned to normal. But six months later another cyst was found, and this time it was malignant. That year was a tough one on the Jansens. Emotionally and financially. Not only did Mary have to weather five months of chemotherapy, they nearly lost Fred's father to a heart attack. Katie traveled with her Dad on Labor Day weekend to visit grandpa Fred in the hospital. The weary smile on his face when she came in the room nearly broke her heart.

The summers spent at her grandparents' cabin had made them inseparable companions. The thought of losing him was too much to bear. She spent the whole day in his hospital room, reading to him from books she'd brought, and holding the cup of ice water to his mouth when he got thirsty. When Katie left with her Dad that evening, they were all feeling better. Now, four weeks later, with mother's therapy done and grandpa home on the mend, Katie was hurrying out the door, roller skates in hand, when she nearly ran into Mr. Tommersdahl.

"I'M SORRY, I..I..I DIDN'T SEE YOU," she stammered.

"I'D LIKE TO SPEAK TO YOUR FATHER, YOUNG LADY," he announced, ignoring her apology.

Without another word, she raced back inside. While Fred invited Mr. Tommersdahl in, Katie sat on the porch, laced up her skates, and headed around the corner to her friend Jenny's house. Skating was new for Katie, but she was picking it up quickly. She'd learned how to get moving; now, if she could only learn how to stop!

When Tommersdahl left the Jansen's a half hour later, and eased behind the wheel of his car, he was preoccupied. Fred wasn't ready to sell the store—yet. But he could feel him beginning to hedge—just a bit. For the first time, Tommersdahl felt he had him in his sites, now it was just a matter of time.

As he turned the corner from Maple to Elm, Tommersdahl's mind was not on his driving. Just at the moment he started to accelerate, his eye caught a blur streaking in from the left side. He hit the breaks, felt a thud, and heard a scream. Clambering out the door, he rushed to the front to find Katie halfway under his car, unmoving. Up the driveway Jenny was screaming, her face frozen with fear.

They'd been taking turns practicing their stopping. Only this time, as Katie skated down the driveway she lost her balance and went careening out into the street in front of the car. The impact broke her right leg and sent her head and left shoulder crashing to the ground. And while her helmet absorbed

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some of the fall, she hit the asphalt hard enough to be knocked unconscious. Seeing her lay there, Tommersdahl turned white as a sheet and he began to shake.

Jenny's mother called 911, then called the Jansens. Moments later, Fred came tearing around the corner on foot, and saw his girl underneath the big Cadillac. "BACK THE CAR UP!" he shouted. Fumbling with his keys, Tommersdahl got in the car, and with hands trembling backed it over to the curb.

It wasn't until the paramedics arrived minutes later, and took Katie's vital signs that Tommersdahl allowed himself to believe that he hadn't killed the girl. They immobilized her head and leg, stopped the bleeding, and had her in the ambulance within ten minutes. Katie's folks rode in the back.

It was a good hour before Tommersdahl calmed down enough to get behind the wheel again. As he sat on the curb, his mind played through the scene over and over…

- If only he had paid more attention,
- If only his mind had been clear,
- If only he'd been watching instead of obsessing over how to get his hands on somebody else's livelihood.
- If…if…if…

A tide of self-loathing rose inside him, bearing losses and memories long buried from his past. C. J. Tommersdahl the Third hated himself, hated what he'd become. But he was stuck, and for the life of him, could see no way out.

News travels fast in a small town, though the facts don't necessarily keep up. Some said Old Tommersdahl had been drinking; others, that he'd tried to hit the girl. All of them hoped, secretly, that a law suit would be in the works—one big enough to bring C. J. Tommersdahl down a few notches; maybe even run him out of business altogether.

Katie was taken to the medical center in Rockford. Setting her leg had required surgery. Forty-eight hours had passed since the accident and still she was unconscious. Tests indicated a severe concussion, though the exact extent of the injury to her brain wouldn't be known until she gained consciousness.

Tommersdahl had called the Jansen home that first night, but he left no message when the answering machine came on. He called the hospital in Rockford, but when they asked if he was a relative, he hung up. The next day, he called again, this time asking to speak to Katie's nurse.

"ARE YOU A FAMILY MEMBER?" the operator asked. "YES," he replied.

Katie was fortunate to be alive, the nurse told him. The surgery on her leg had gone well, it was the swelling in her head that they were concerned about. She was still unconscious.

When he arrived at the hospital the next afternoon he watched the hall carefully. He wasn't ready to see Katie's parents. For the first time in many years, he felt . . . *vulnerable*. After finding her room, he waited in the lobby until he saw the Jensen's leave for dinner. Then, he went up to her room, and ducked inside. A web of IV's, pumps and monitors stood like sentinels around her. She was on her

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back; her right leg, in a full-length cast, was elevated. Bandages covered her left arm and shoulder, her head and her eyes. She seemed so small.

Slowly, Tommersdahl lowered himself into the chair across from her bed. As he listened to the beeps and watched the blips on her monitors, he thought about her young life. He thought about the impact this new crisis would have on the Jansen family. A fleeting thought stole 'cross his mind—"maybe Jansen will sell now"—before he could push it away.

Shame overcame him. Was this all that his life amounted to, then? Accumulating wealth? Getting what you want, no matter the cost? To what end? Good God! He had not always been this greedy—this self-centered; where had he gone wrong? He felt a deep hollowness grow in his chest, as an unspoken plea formed in his heart: "Lord, is it too late for this old man to change his ways? May it not be so…"

Minutes passed. Katie stirred a little. It was time for him to go. Her parents might return any moment. Rising, he stepped over to her bedside. Reaching out, he placed his hand on hers, allowing it to rest there a moment. Then he turned to leave.

As he reached the door a faint, hoarse voice called out:
"I'M THIRSTY." She was awake. He turned to face her. "WHAT DID YOU SAY?" he asked.

"I'M THIRSTY," she said. "CAN I HAVE SOMETHING TO DRINK?"

"SURE…SURE YOU CAN."

He walked to the bedside table, took the cup of water, and carefully guided the straw to her lips. She took three long sips and swallowed. Just then the nurse walked in.

"SHE WOKE UP…SHE WAS THIRSTY," he said, "WAS THAT ALRIGHT?"
"WONDERFUL," she replied. "ARE YOU HER GRANDPA?"

He blushed. "NO. I'M...A FRIEND."

The nurse explained to Katie what had happened, and told her she would page her Mom and Dad right away. Then she left.

"MR.?" Katie called out. "WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

"YOU CAN CALL ME "C. J." IF YOU LIKE. YOU KNOW YOU HAD ME—HAD US ALL—WORRIED. I'M GLAD YOU'RE AWAKE. YOUR FOLKS WILL BE BACK SOON. IT'S TIME FOR ME TO GO."

"THANKS FOR THE WATER, C. J.," she said.
"MY PLEASURE, MY DEAR," came his reply, in the gentlest voice he could muster; and then he slipped out of the room.

Re-formation; transformation; second chance. Sometimes, change takes its sweet time in a person. But other times it can happen just like that. For C. J. Tommersdahl the Third, the turning was swift and irrevocable.

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To the disappointment of many in Franklin Grove, the Jansens filed no suit. Mr. Tommersdahl insisted he pay all of Katie's medical bills—which he did. And in the ten years he had left before he died C. J. Tommersdahl spent every waking moment working to dismantle his old reputation as a skinflint and miser, and to set about building a legacy of generosity and civic mindedness that lives on in Franklin Grove to this day.

May the legacy of divine grace which we celebrate this Reformation Day, and the power of Christ Jesus to transform our lives, encourage us all to put our trust in the God who makes all things new.

Amen.