

## Saint Prine and Saint Peter 1 Peter 1:3-9

John Prine was one of the first celebrities to pass from the coronavirus. He died on April 7<sup>th</sup> at the age of 73. I was vaguely familiar with Prine, having seen him a time or two on TV, but I didn't know much about him or his music until he passed away. It was then that I looked him up on Google and came across a *Rolling Stone's* article about him that was published back in January of 2017.<sup>1</sup>

Prine was born up in Maywood, Illinois, out on the westside of Chicago. He served a stint in the Army during the war in Vietnam and worked as a mailman after his return. It was on his mail route that he worked out the lyrics to some of his very first songs. In 1969 he had his first live performance, singing during an open-mic night at the Fifth Peg on Armitage Avenue in Chicago. Soon he was playing for pay at the Earl of Old Town and making acquaintance with the likes of Bob Dylan, Kris Kristofferson, Bill Murray, John Belushi, Bonnie Raitt, and others.

Like many in the music scene back in those days, Prine got involved with alcohol and drugs, drinking heavily and drugging regularly. He also had two failed marriages before finally meeting his third and final wife, Fiona. That seems to be when Prine settled down a bit. Then, in 1996, things took a rather dark turn. Prine had a bump on his neck that he'd been shaving around for a quite some time when he finally decided to have it looked at. It turned out to be cancer. The doctors had to remove a portion of his neck to get all the cancer, and it left his head permanently slumped. It also effected his voice, making it a bit more gravelly. Cancer would return to his lungs in 2013, but he would beat that, too. Fiona said of that first bout with cancer, "It sounds a little cliché...But John and I don't laugh at this: That neck is proof there is a God. That neck is the hand of God, because it gave him more than was taken away."<sup>2</sup>

Yes, somewhere along the line, John Prine came to faith. Maybe he had it all along. According to an early review of Prine's music, written by Roger Ebert, Prine's grandfather was a part-time preacher.<sup>3</sup> Maybe the seeds of faith were sown by his grandpa when Prine was just a child, but it took some time for those seeds to sprout and bear fruit in John's life. Whatever the case may be, Prine acknowledged his faith in that 2017 interview with *Rolling Stone*, though he also acknowledged feeling some frustration over the way some Christians use the bible as a weapon to attack other people with whom they disagree.

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<sup>1</sup> *Inside the Life of John Prine, the Mark Twain of American Songwriting* by Patrick Doyle. Published January 4, 2017 *Rolling Stone*. Located at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/inside-the-life-of-john-prine-the-mark-twain-of-american-songwriting-115459/>. Current as of April 15, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *From 1970: John Prine's First Review by Roger Ebert*. Located at: <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2020/4/7/21199183/john-prine-dead-review-first-roger-ebert-sun-times-1970-fifth-peg>. Current as of April 15, 2020.

Anyway, John's faith shows itself in his final album – *The Tree of Forgiveness* – published in 2018. It was the first album of original music produced by John in 13 years. The long delay was caused, ironically, by John's happiness. He'd finally found his place in life with his wife and children and had nothing more to gain or prove, so he didn't feel the need to write any new songs, I suppose. But a man of his creativity couldn't be quiet forever so he produced *The Tree of Forgiveness* in 2018. The title itself comes from the last song on the album – *When I Get To Heaven*. Prine sings:<sup>4</sup>

When I get to heaven, I'm gonna shake God's hand  
Thank him for more blessings than one man can stand  
Then I'm gonna get a guitar and start a rock-n-roll band  
Check into a swell hotel; ain't the afterlife grand?

Then as God as my witness, I'm gettin' back into showbusiness  
I'm gonna open up a nightclub called "The Tree of Forgiveness"  
And forgive everybody ever done me any harm...

Seems like Prine is onto something in this song. After all, didn't Jesus say, "...forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you..."? (Mk. 11:25) I'm pretty sure he did!

Of the ten songs that appear on *The Tree of Forgiveness*, it's the last three especially that give voice to John's faith. The ninth song is entitled *God Only Knows* and reads like a modern version of the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm – a meditation on God's knowledge of us. Where the 139<sup>th</sup> Psalm begins with these words – O Lord, you have searched me and known me – Prine's song begins with these:

God only knows the price that you pay  
For the ones you hurt along the way  
If I should betray myself today  
Then God only knows the price I pay

God only knows  
God only knows

God only knows the way that I feel  
Is only a part of the way that I feel  
If I can't reveal that way that I feel  
Then God only knows the way that I feel

God only knows  
God only knows...

Yes, God only knows us completely. We don't even know ourselves as well as we ought.

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<sup>4</sup> Lyrics to all songs come from John Prine's album *The Tree of Forgiveness*, Old Boy Record Label. Released April 13, 2018.

The eighth song on the album, and the song that moves me most, is entitled *Boundless Love*. It starts out sounding like John might be singing to his wife Fiona about her boundless love for him. But then it comes at last to this. John sings:

If by chance I should find myself at risk  
A-falling from this jagged cliff  
I look below, and I look above  
I'm surrounded by your boundless love  
  
Surround me with your boundless love  
Confound me with your boundless love  
I was drowning in the sea, lost as I could be  
When you found me with your boundless love  
You dumbfound me with your boundless love  
You surround me with your boundless love

And suddenly you realize that John is singing about a love greater than any mortal love, no matter how great that love might be. He's singing of that "love that will not let us go!" – the love of God himself – who loves us with a boundless love that surrounds, confounds, and dumbfounds us! I must confess, I get a bit misty eyed every time I hear John sing it because it reminds me of how I was drowning in the sea, lost as I could be, when God found me with his boundless love.

Yes, the last three songs on *The Tree of Forgiveness*, give clearest expression to the faith of John Prine. But there's one other song that struck me on his album. Nestled near the middle of the album is the song *Summer's End*. Prine sings:

Summer's end's around the bend just flying  
The swimming suits are on the line just drying  
I'll meet you there per our conversation  
I hope I didn't ruin your whole vacation  
  
Just come on home  
Come on home  
No you don't have to be alone  
Just come on home...

And then, toward the end of that song, these words:

The moon and stars hang out in bars just talking  
I still love that picture of us walking  
Just like that ol' house we thought was haunted  
Summer's end came faster than we wanted  
  
Come on home  
Come on home

No you don't have to be alone  
Come on home...

Well, on April 7<sup>th</sup> of this year, summer's end came sooner than we wanted for John Prine when the Voice of Boundless Love called his name and said to him: "Come on home. Come on home. You don't have to be alone." And John went home...

So, what does any of this have to do with our reading for today? Well the connection may be a loose one, and I must confess, it may only be a connection in my mind, but I thought of Prine when I read the Peter passage assigned to this Sunday. You see, the apostle Peter said, "By his great mercy (God) has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." (1 Pe. 1:3-5)

You see, the resurrection of Jesus gives us what Peter calls a living hope – hope for this life and hope for the life to come. Yes, Jesus' resurrection gives us hope for this life because it proves to us that death and darkness shall never have the final say. Rather, life and light will win out in the end. Just as the Cross of Good Friday was overturned by the Resurrection of Easter Sunday, with God's help, our darkest days will give way to brighter days ahead. Do you remember what John's wife Fiona said about John's neck cancer? She said it gave him more than it took away.

But even if that grand reversal doesn't happen in this life – even if our darkest days don't give way to brighter days on earth – then those dark days will give way to brighter days in the world to come. For those of us who have been joined to Jesus shall receive from Jesus an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading – an inheritance that is kept in heaven for us – an inheritance that will be revealed to us when our time on earth is over. Should summer's end come sooner than we want, then the Voice of Boundless Love will call our name and take us home – home where we won't ever be alone – home where we'll shake God's hand and thank him for more blessings than we could ever, ever stand!

No wonder, in light of all of this, that Peter says, "...in this (knowledge) (we) rejoice, even if now for a little while (we) have to suffer various trials..." (1 Pe. 1:6) Yes, we rejoice in hope knowing that even though we suffer in this life, God will either bring us out or bring us through that suffering – out or through that suffering to brighter days now or to the unending days of a brighter life in that grand mystery that lies ahead!

John Prine had a vision of what that afterlife might be like and he sang about it in the refrain to his song *When I Get To Heaven*. He sang:

(When I get to heaven), I'm gonna get a cocktail: vodka and ginger ale  
Yeah, I'm gonna smoke a cigarette that's nine miles long

I'm gonna kiss that pretty girl on the tilt-a-whirl  
'Cause this old man is goin' to town...

John! You rascal and scamp! Your vision of heaven isn't quite the same as mine, and I wonder if maybe you weren't just singing with tongue in cheek when you sang those silly words, but I'll tell you what. When I get to heaven, if heaven turns out like you imagined it, then hold the vodka and the cigarette; I have no taste for them. But you can pour me a ginger ale! And then you can pull out your guitar and let me sing along with you as together we sing a little song of praise to God, saying:

I was drowning in the sea, lost as I could be  
When (Lord) you found me with your boundless love  
You dumbfound me with your boundless love  
You surround me with your boundless love.  
Thank you, Jesus, for your boundless love!

Will you do that for me, John? Will you sing that with me, John? I hope so!

Well my friends, "By his great mercy (God) has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for (us)." (1 Pe. 1:3-5) The word of God for the people of God! Amen!