

Our Partner On The Ride

John 14:16-26

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Chances are that if you are not from Pittsburgh, Kennywood is a place you've never heard of before. But if you ask any local from Pittsburgh what Kennywood is all about, they will tell you it's also a Pittsburgh tradition like the Steelers or Heinz Ketchup.

In Pittsburgh, Kennywood is an 116-year-old family owned amusement park. While Kennywood is not a large park like Busch Gardens or even Kings Dominion nor is it a theme park like Disney World, it's a small amusement park that has been a staple for any child growing up in the Pittsburgh area for generations.

One of the many roller coasters you will find at Kennywood is called The Racer. Built in 1927, The Racer is one of the oldest wooden coasters you will find in the United States. And for many, it's one of the scariest and most intimidating rides in the park. Not just because it's a roller coaster. But it's an old wooden coaster and with peeling paint, shaky boards, and from the split-erring wood, it doesn't look like a roller coaster but looks like termite mites holding hands.

For starters, like all wooden coasters so when you get into your seat, you notice the lack of shoulder bars you find on new metal coasters. There is only a piece of rubber you put around your waist to hold you in. Second, as you are leaving the station and are headed up a hill, you hear a clicking noise from the chains as you get higher, higher, and higher. Click. Click. Click. And then for a moment at the peak—it stops. And then the drop—straight down—going so fast that for a second you can feel the car coming off the track before it curves at the bottom and whips you to the left---then to the right---then back to the left—and then up hill a new hill and once more, click-click-click. And after more drops and turns, it whips you around a third time before you end back up at the station.

While in reality, The Racer is just an old roller coaster ride, I have always wondered what caused my friends and me to be afraid of it as children. Okay, maybe the shaky boards have something to do with it. But while roller coasters like The Racer can be intimidating, they are generally really safe, are inspected daily, and it's a safer trip than compared to the rides in our cars on our way to church this morning. Yet whether you are one of those who can ride roller coasters again, again, and again, or one of those who tells your friends you are going to "take a break" when others want to ride on something that may cause them to bring up the french fries and caramel apples they had for lunch, then why are we afraid of them?

Our scripture today is about not only facing our fears like riding shaky old wooden roller coasters, but our scripture today reassures us that when we face our new challenges, Christ is the companion sitting next to us even if we are going downhill with the wind in our face, our hands in the air, and are screaming at the top of our lungs.

Jesus is still giving His farewell discourse. As far as His physical presence is concerned, He is about to leave the disciples. He comforts them (14:16-17) with the promise of the coming Spirit, the Helper. His message gives a strong basis for the comfort. He tells the

disciples (14:25-26) how the Holy Spirit will teach them and bring what He had taught to their remembrance.

While Jesus in this passage is not pointing out the shady boards and the dangerous dips in an effort to make his disciples more afraid than what they already are, he is rather letting them know about what they are getting into when they proclaim his word and spreading it across the land.

Yesterday, I was watching the movie, *50/50*. If you haven't seen this movie, it's a comedy-drama film which came out in 2011 and is a 27-year-old radio journalist from Seattle named Adam.

Adam, who is not only a quiet and simple person, is not a risk taker in life. I mean, literally. For starters, when the crosswalk blinks at intersections, Adam, do not walk but stays put even when no vehicles are to be seen. Adam does not drive because it is the 5th leading cause of death. Adam does not drink because it can damage your liver, he does not smoke because it damages your lungs, and he eats the perfect diet and exercises everyday as not to damage his heart.

But when Adam is diagnosed with a rare form of spinal cancer and is only given a 50 percent chance of living, not only is his life changed in an instant as he deals with things like losing his hair and his girlfriend who cannot deal with his sickness, but he finds himself facing everything he fears at once—including what he fears the most: death.

"But I don't smoke," Adam tells the doctor in one scene after the doctor, using high medical terms, tells Adam he has cancer. "I don't drink, I don't drive, I even recycle," Adam says.

For Adam, it wasn't his choice to be placed onto a roller-coaster with not only 50/50 odds he will survive the ride, nor was it his choice to go for the ride of ups and downs, twists, and turns of chemotherapy, becoming weaker, and at a young age—having to deal with the possibility of dying.

Rather, the track of Adam's life went only in one direction and despite his fears, he could only move forward.

For some people like Adam facing a major health crisis, it's knowing you will have to endure a roller-coaster of medications, surgery, and sometimes poor prognosis which cause you to fear. And much like the shaky boards and creaks and clicks of just seeing an old wooden coaster, it's walking into the hospital and being there for days, weeks, and months which can make the ride even more painful than the illness itself.

And if it's not health issues we are facing, it may be personal issues which have us sitting on a ride we didn't buy a ticket to enduring. Perhaps it could be the ride of beginning the process of a divorce and fears of how this will impact the lives of our children. Or perhaps it's the ride of learning that our employer is going through a downsizing process and our job at the place we worked for many years is coming to an end. Perhaps the ride we experience when going through the mourning process of a loved one or the process or realizing we are going to have and leave the home we lived at for many years because we can't get around it anymore due to our age. And even if we aren't enduring a season of change in our life, maybe it's simply looking back at where we have been in our lives and what is next is causing us to be afraid.

You see, our lives are much like being on an old wooden roller-coaster. We have times

we are going up and other times we are going down. Sometimes we are being thrown to the left, other times to the right—and sometimes for some of us are thrown upside down and lose ourselves and maybe our lunches along the way. But no matter how fast we are going, our how long that ride seems to be, two things are always certain: through Jesus Christ, the crazy roller-coaster ride you are in will come to end.

And at every point of the ride, we are never sitting alone. Even if it means sitting in a cramped car with a big guy next to you.

Last year, SoulPancake which is a website that helps individuals explore "big think" topics such as spirituality, creativity, religion, arts, and philosophy decided to do an experiment. By placing a large ball pit in the middle of New York City, they invited two people who were walking by to sit down in the ball pit and ask each other questions such as "what is one thing you always wanted to do in life?" or "Describe the first time you have ever been in love?" or "What are one thing you have in common?"

In this experiment which they captured on video, strangers of different backgrounds, ethnicity, and diversities, began to not only share stories about their lives, hopes, and dreams, but most of all, they found common ground in their stories, struggles, and their roller-coasters in life.

From an older white woman and a younger African-American woman who discovered their shared personal struggles with multiple sclerosis to an older man from India to a middle aged Caucasian man from Chicago who talked about dealing with the end of relationships in their lives, the video captured the understanding that all of us, no matter who we are, where we are from, or where we are going, experience struggles every day and we are not experiencing them alone. And while our struggles may not be the same, there is a sense of comfort in knowing that God puts other people in our lives during the ups and the downs to bring us companionship through whatever we may experience.

While our friend Adam finds himself going through the many dark twists and turns in his life, in ways more than one (without ruining this movie for you) he finds companionship throughout his road with cancer. From the friendship of his humorous best friend to the special friendship he forms with older men in their 60s and 70s at the chemotherapy clinic that encourage him that he still can have fun even with cancer, the movie shows us that we can find others who will go through challenges with us even in places which we did not expect to find.

From the hand of a friend as a man waits for the results of an important medical test. From the presence of a colleague at work who takes a moment and listens to a co-worker talk about her troubled marriage. From the person who stops and prays with a stranger on the street. To the person who offers a warm smile to a woman as she offers warm soup during a homeless shelter. The healing touch of holding hands with that person next to you during a prayer service. Even in the world which there is so much suffering, God is finding a way to bring a companion into our lives who reminds us that we are not alone in what we are enduring. And it's through this companionship and through this reassurance from God that he is present with our suffering and its eventual end that gives us courage.

Theologian Paul Tillich says of courage this way: courage is a strength of mind, capable of conquering whatever threatens the attainment of the highest good. To attain this highest good, we need to realize that blind courage, such as charging a hill, does not necessarily attain the highest good. True, it may save lives or end the war or increase territories, but these are typically short-sighted results. To attain the highest good from an act

of courage it must be integrated with wisdom and balanced by temperance and justice. In other words, courage listens to reason and carries out the intention of the mind. It is the strength of the soul to win victory in ultimate danger." As such, true courage is seen in the capacity to search for meaning in life, to search for one's true purpose, and to struggle with the anxiety of one's existence. This can experience as the courage to overcome physical danger, the courage to maintain moral integrity in the direst circumstances, or the courage to "relate to other human beings in such a way as to risk one's self in the hope of achieving meaningful intimacy."

My friends, as we find ourselves riding the roller-coaster of our lives, it's important to know that no matter how squeaky those boards may be, no matter how many hills we go down or how many curves we have to endure, we are not riding our struggles alone. For it's through God, who not only puts people in our lives but works through the people our lives that remind us that we have companions who are going to travel with us along our scary rides. And it's through the assurance of our faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, that remind us that we will not fall out, no matter how long the ride may be. Even if our faith is as thin as a thin rubber bungee cord.

Throughout the difficulties you may be facing now and are discouraged and even become afraid by the shaky boards and rickety clicks you will hear from others or even ourselves about the future, I encourage you to hold on, keep strong, and if you need, grab the hand of those in your lives next to you. But just like roller-coaster rides, you are never riding alone and even if that ride seems like it will go on forever, it will indeed come to an end.

Bibliography

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