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**“Sharing the Mantle”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)
June 30, 2013**

2 Kings 2:1–2, 6–14; Psalm 77:1–2, 11–20; Luke 9:51–62

Do you think we could sing our way through a sermon?

That's what I want us to do this morning because it is what God's people
do when times are difficult... we lift up our voices and sing together.

I was reading in the *Durham Herald Sun* last Monday
about the witness of the civil rights protesters in 1963 who staged
the sit-in at the Royal Ice Cream Parlor here in Durham
and committed other acts of non-violent civil disobedience.

Said Faye Mayo, one local protester of racial segregation
at the Carolina Theater in the 1960s:

“It's amazing what songs can do for you. We were tired,
we were hot, we were hungry.

We stayed in jail all night and we continued to sing.

The jailer asked us, 'Ain't y'all tired yet?' And we said,

“Yes, we're tired of segregation.”

(Jamica Ashley. *The Herald Sun*. “Remembering Durham's civil rights spring,” June 24, 2013)

Over my head, there are beautiful spirituals in the air when I read
through today's Old Testament and New Testament texts about Elijah, Elisha, Jesus,
and their faithful band of followers as they walk through the
uncertainty of transition, always moving forward, not looking back.

And while our present church is in a state of transition, too, I want us to learn
from faithful people of the past, who have sung their way through transitions
and have learned to lean on God and one another in the process.

The first spiritual I want us to sing is *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

This song is attributed to a Choctaw freedman named Wallis Willis,
who supposedly composed the hymn in the 1840s
when the US government forced all Native Americans
to leave their homes and move west along a Trail of Tears.

The Willis family settled near Doaksville, Oklahoma,
where they were said to have composed and sung this song
for the students at Spencer Academy there, along with another spiritual,
Steal Away to Jesus.

Some music historians give another version of the origins of the song,
saying that it was code music—a secret message—used by slaves
trying to escape via the underground railroad to Canada.

They would change the lyrics to *Swing Low, Sweet Harriet*, a reference to Harriet Tubman,
leader of the underground railroad, who could secure
the safe passage to freedom for fleeing slaves fleeing to the north.

The song was first performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1909,
and has been recognized by the Recording Industry Association of America
as one of the "Songs of the Century."

Sweet Chariot is a reference to the mystic experience of the prophets Elijah and Elisha
in verse 11 of our Old Testament reading today, when chariots and horses of fire
arrive to whisk Elijah into heaven in a whirlwind... sans death.

It speaks apocalyptically of a future time yet to be revealed
when mourning and crying and pain and even death will be no more,
for the old order of things will have passed away (Rev. 21:4).

It gives a glimpse of things to come for those with eyes to see and ears to hear,
like Elisha, who will receive a double portion of spirit, inspiration and courage
if he perceives the vision and follows its leading.

If he/we fail to see, or don't care to see, the wonderful things God had in store for God's people, then we will be left uninspired, unfocused, and unmotivated to move forward in this dangerous present world.

Says James Martin, a spirituals expert and Julliard graduate,

"*Sweet Chariot* was a sign of hope that someone was coming to help... so it has always been not just an inspirational hope, but a real hope."

Says Kim Burge, a relative of the song's composer,

"If nobody passes anything on, how can you have any idea of the future? You have to have a foundation to build on."

(Melanie Eversley, *USA Today*. "Story behind spiritual 'Sweet Chariot' emerges." 8/15/2006)

So in our present time of transition at FPC, as we work to perpetuate ministries that have been important to us in the past, through the present, and into the future, who are you encouraging to catch the vision and carry on your particular passion for ministry?

What younger person are you mentoring and inspiring to assume responsibility for your particular mission or service to the church?

What other people are you inviting to walk with you in your current role of leadership in hopes that they also will be inspired to serve beside you, with you, and then one day in your stead?

Who is playing Elisha to your Elijah? Let us sing together a song of the faith, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

Sing: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*



The second spiritual that I want us to sing together is *Stand by Me*.

It was written by Charles Albert Tindley, an eminent African American preacher, orator, poet, writer, theologian and social activist of the early 20th century.

The son of a slave and a free woman, Tindley grew up during the Civil War as a free black man among slaves.

Following the Civil War, he moved to Philadelphia as a young person,
where he became the custodian at a Methodist Episcopal church,
working for free for 15 years and attending school at night to self-educate.

He said, "I made a rule to learn at least one new thing—a thing I did not know
the day before—each day."

(C. Michael Hawn, History of Hymns: "Gospel song urges Christ to Stand By Me
during trials," *United Methodist Reporter*. January 30, 2013)

During that time, he enlisted the help of a Philadelphia synagogue to teach him Hebrew
and learned Greek from a correspondence course
through the Boston Theological School.

Thus without any degrees, he qualified for ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church
by examination, and he rose through the ranks to become a pastor.

But the best part of the story is this: in 1902 Tindley became the pastor
of the Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia,
the same church in which he had served as custodian for 15 years.

Not all members of the old congregation were pleased
when their former custodian showed up in their pulpit
sporting a mantle of coat and tails, the garb of many prominent African American preachers.

But when he rendered a well-written, masterful sermon,
they were among the first to offer their loud amens!

Tindley not only preached every Sunday, but he also wrote gospel hymns
like *Stand By Me* and *I'll Overcome Someday* to accompany his sermons.

The church over time grew from a small congregation of 130 members
to a multi-racial congregation of 10,000 members, which today is known
as Tindley Temple in Philadelphia.

I told our custodian, Robert Daye, this remarkable story, and he responded in surprise:
"Is that right, Marilyn?"

And I went on to plant the seed that since he had been here at FPC for 35 years,
longer than the 33 years Joe was here,

and since he knows everybody and everything about the church
and is probably innately the nicest person on our staff,
perhaps he should dust off a sermon and apply to be our next pastor!

To which he replied, "I don't think so, Marilyn."

But perhaps you all can persuade him otherwise.

The lesson in Charles Tindley's story, I think, is for everyone, no matter your position,
to be ready to step into leadership, if you are so called.

God can use all of our gifts and employ any of us at any moment
to lead a movement on behalf of God's beloved people.

In the Reformed Tradition, we call this *the priesthood of all believers*.

"Every Christian is someone else's priest, and we are all priests to one another."

(Peter Leithart. *First Things*. "On the Square," October 20, 2010)

Tindley, by the way, was a very involved social activist in Philadelphia,
working with business leaders to help his members find jobs in a depressed area,
soliciting donations from local businesses to feed the hungry,
and protesting the showing of the film "Birth of a Nation" when it was released
because of its promotion of white supremacy which he adamantly opposed.

The song *Stand By Me* is a petition for Jesus to stand beside us in our times of trouble
when the storms of life are raging.

It could be a song sung by Elisha on the chilly banks of the Jordan
upon realization that Elijah has left him holding the mantle of prophetic leadership
and wondering aloud if God has left him, too.

It could be a song sung by Jesus himself as he turns his face towards Jerusalem,
imploring those around him to stay close, to stay with him, to leave their
families and personal concerns behind and to journey with him towards the city
and the uncertain fate that awaits them there.

It could be a song sung by me to you, asking you to join me in sharing the mantle
of leadership here and imploring us to act as the whole people of God,
owning up to the ministry which is ours together as we turn our face

towards this city, Durham, and work towards the common good of all people who make it their home.

Let us sing this old hymn together, as a prayer, *Stand by Me*.

Sing: *Stand By Me*



The third spiritual, which we will hear sung by Lewis in a moment is *Hold On, Keep Your Hand to the Plow*, or *Gospel Plow*, as it is sometimes known.

It is an early American hymn of unknown origin that has been attributed to the abolitionist movement of the 19th century.

It refers to best practices of farming, where one dares not take eyes off a focal point at the far end of the field, lest the oxen providing power make crooked folly out of one's straight intent.

Or it means to keep your hand on the plow for guidance, so the blade stays upright in the ground and turns the soil, or else the plow will fall to its side and just be dragged uselessly across the field by the oxen.

In other words, stay focused! Keep your eyes on the prize! Don't meander!

It's the ancient equivalent of "No texting while driving," or you might end up in a ditch.

The song is a reminder to those of us here now, doing church, to remember why we are here in the first place: to worship God and to make following Jesus a priority in our lives, the first priority, preeminent to all other priorities.

When Elijah first taps Elisha with his mantle for prophetic ministry back in 1 Kings 19, he at least allows Elisha the luxury of going back home

to kiss his father and mother good-bye,

to burn his old plowing equipment, slaughter his oxen, and give the cooked meat away to hungry people there as a goodwill offering

before leaving it all behind to follow his mentor 100%. (1 Kings 19: 20-21)

Jesus affords no such luxury to his followers, as he sets his face towards Jerusalem, the city where he will meet face to face with the powers that wish him dead.

He prepares his followers for rejection, by taking them through Samaritan territory,
enemy territory, where they are shown no love, offered no hospitality,
treated like dirt,
but he won't let them respond in kind to those there who wish them ill.

I go back to the Royal Ice Cream Parlor protest here in Durham in 1963,
where the Royal 7 protesters marched into the all-white parlor vowing to respond
non-violently, regardless of the treatment they received.

And when the manager kept asking them again and again to leave the premises
or they would be arrested, the Royal 7 consistently replied,
"I'd like some ice cream, please."

(Jamica Ashley, *The Herald Sun*, "Remembering Durham's civil rights spring," June 24, 2013)

Jesus keeps his disciples together and focused upon their goal: offering love, hope,
healing and forgiveness, even to those who reject them.

He refuses to let them use violence of any kind to retaliate; it's not *the Way* they are to plow.

And then he teaches them what true discipleship will entail:

a detachment to anything that smacks of shelter, food, comfort, security,
and home sweet home

with a total dependency upon God and upon the hospitality of others,
no focus on the family here, no blood comes first,
but rather a focus upon the God family

which disciples are given to nurture and build into a holy people, a royal priesthood.

Jesus demands speak to suffering people who might be imprisoned or arrested
for their faith, encouraging them to hold on to what is good, to what they believe,
to the faith that has called them into being, no matter the consequences.

And his demands speak to all of us in times of transition,

to not look back on the good old days with nostalgic longing,
but to keep our eyes focused forward to the future just across the field,

on the shimmering vision of the kingdom of God rising out of the heat,
and upon Jesus, himself, "the author and perfecter of our faith,
who for the joy set before him endured the cross,

scorning its shame, and sat down on the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

Keep your hand on the plow. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on. Amen.

Anthem: *Hold On: Keep Your Hand to the Plow*



Benediction: *Hold on to what is good. Return no one evil for evil. Honor one another more than yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit keep us both now and forever. Amen.