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“Beautiful Feet”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Isaiah 52:7-10; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3: 14-21
March 22, 2009

Congregations are a lot like orchestras, I think,
in that we need a ritual of “fine tuning” before we can function well.
In an orchestra, the oboist begins the fine tuning by playing,
a single pure sound, a thin reedy A,
and then the flutes, clarinets, bassoons, and all the other
woodwinds
try to match pitch, more or less.
It’s not a perfect art, apparently, being an orchestra,
but, nevertheless, they all try to adjust their instruments to somewhere
half-way between an A flat and an A sharp.
Then someone in the brass section, the trumpet section leader maybe,
plays that same A, and all the brass instruments
try to match that brassy A as well.
My son, who is a percussionist, tells me that this is where he tries
to tune the timpani and his other percussion instruments,
because they are loud,
and can hide under the tubas, trombones, and other horns tuning up.
And lastly, the concertmaster, the principle violinist,

stands and bows a stringy A,
and all of the stringed instruments follow randomly.
Then one more A by the concertmaster,
and one more tone-match by the entire orchestra,
a few more coughs and fidgets, and then they are fine tuned
and ready to perform.

I always enjoy this ritual, because it is a rather messy amalgam of sound
trying to coalesce into something beautiful that will honor the composer,
as we hope the worship of a congregation is striving to coalesce
into beautiful works of mercy, service, and kindness once we walk out of
these doors.

I like the orchestral warm-up, because it is never perfect:
someone's always a little flat; someone else, a little sharp.
But out of their efforts at cooperation and consensus;
out of that single solitary note, that A,
comes some of the most lovely complex arrangements of music
imaginable.

John 3:16

*For God so loved the world
that he gave his only-begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish,
but have everlasting life.*

It is the A of the New Testament to which many of us fine-tune our faith.
For those of us who grew up going to Sunday School,
or going to Vacation Bible School,
or participating in sword drills,
or who may have experienced confirmation class
as a memorization boot camp,
this verse, along with perhaps the 23rd Psalm of the Old Testament,

are the centerpieces of our stored biblical memory,
tucked away somewhere close to our amygdale,
our quick-reactive reptilian brain.

It's one of those verses that helps us "straighten up and walk right",
as my mother might say, when life around us starts to pull apart.
And it can mean different things to us at different times,
depending upon where we put the emphasis.

I'll never forget hearing theologian Shirley Guthrie
wax eloquent on this verse in seminary,
putting his emphasis upon what God has done,
not just for us, but for the WORLD:

God's love for the world,
God's self-sacrifice for the world,
God's suffering loss for a hurting world.

I had always put the emphasis on "whosoever believes";
on the things that WE must do to gain eternal life.

But Shirley put the accents on LOVE and on WORLD.

He even said it that way: God so LOVES the WORLD,
as if those words might have been written in bold in the ancient Koine
Greek.

In his classic work of reformed theology, *Christian Doctrine*, Shirley says,
"God's love is costly, self-giving love.

God does not say from the safe distance of divine superiority,
'I love you poor people down there.

Your hurt and suffering touch me deeply, and I will send help.'

Rather, in Christ, God comes to stand with us and by us,
as one of us, to share our hurt and suffering.

The gift of God's love is not just a 'care package'
or this or that blessing from above; it is God's own self, the only Son."

(Shirley Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*, p. 106)

Interestingly enough, the very last words and the very last biblical citation
in Shirley's *Christian Doctrine*

are in the form of a paraphrase of John 3:16.

He concludes, "For God so loved the world – the sinful world –

that God came in Jesus Christ to bring eternal life to those who believe in
him.

He came not to condemn the world, but that the world -
the whole world – might be saved through him."

(Shirley Guthrie. *Christian Doctrine*. p. 399)

At the end of his book, and I would like to think, at the end of his life,

Shirley Guthrie tuned his faith by this perfect A, this quintessential text,
which is very affirming and comforting to those,

like my family, and like the Conroys and others, perhaps,
who have been dealing with a great deal of *perishing* this week.

Just as it is affirming and comforting to those

smarting from the sting of biting criticism and self-condemnation.

In the beginning, at the end, and everywhere in between,

God loves us, God hurts for and with us,

God stands by us to redeem us through Jesus Christ.

We sometimes forget that John 3:16 comes in the epilogue

of Jesus' night-time conversation with Nicodemus;

the part where Jesus starts to talk of "heavenly things"

and how they connect to the "earthly things" of Nicodemus' daily walk of
life.

Nicodemus doesn't understand that heaven and earth

are colliding in the person standing right before his very eyes.

Jesus uses the bizarre image of the Son of Man being lifted up,

just like that snake lifted up by Moses in the desert;

the very earthly things normally synonymous with perishing – crosses and snakes
-

being transformed by God's heavenly intervention

into instruments of new and everlasting life, instead of death.

Poet RS Thomas calls the cross,

“that long bow drawn against love”,

because it normally would be a sure shot towards death.

(RS Thomas. “Credo”. *Mass for Hard Times*)

But in the world which God so loves, now through Jesus Christ,

death no longer has dominion,

and love trumps all evils.

Our epistle passage from Ephesians says it this way:

“But because of God’s great love for us,

God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ

even when we were dead in transgressions –

and it is by grace we have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:4)

Rob Bell, one of the new leaders of the emerging church

that Steve Hayner talked about a few weeks ago when he was here

for the McPherson lecture,

has some good things to say about our mainline denominations,

even as he presses for new forms of worship.

“What matters,” he says of the mainline churches, “is doing something

about the great causes of our day, from hunger, to disease, to poverty.

The beautiful and historic thing that’s happening is that people

from across the religious spectrum are realizing

that these are all dimensions of what happens

when heaven crashes into earth.”

(Debra Bendix. “Bell’s Appeal”. *The Christian Century*. March 24, 2009, p. 24)

I hope we can hear this loud and clear as we lace up our sneakers

and get ready to witness heaven and earth crashing together

at today's Crop Walk to alleviate hunger.

Some of you are sponsoring walkers, some of you are making cookies for the walkers,

some of you are using your beautiful feet to visit homebound members this week.

In all these things, the incarnation, the kingdom of God

is exploding here and now, as heaven meets earth right here under our feet.

Nicodemus met Jesus under the cover of darkness;

we are getting ready to meet him in the light of day; in the light of God.

Today, you are the bearers of good news, good tidings, peace and salvation.

Today, you are the sacrament, the visible sign of God's invisible grace.

Today, you are the orchestra of God's beautiful music.

So, before we take to the streets to bring the good news,

let us tune our earthly instruments to God's heavenly note.

Repeat after me:

*God so loved
THE WORLD
That he gave
His only-begotten Son,
That whosoever
Believeth in him,
Should not perish,
But have everlasting life. Amen.*