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“Linked into the Network of Eternal Life”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Palm Sunday (Year C)

March 24, 2013

Luke 19:28–40; Philippians 2:1–11; Luke 22:14–23:56

The McIntyres were my neighbors, three doors down, when I was growing up in Charlotte.

They lived in a post-war miracle, a mint-green, pre-fab house,
what we might now call a modular home or mobile unit.

In its day, it would have been the epitome of efficiency;

as time went by, it became more and more modest in comparison to other homes.

But the McIntyres had surrounded their postage-stamp house with beautiful gardens
on all sides—camellias, roses, flowers and vegetables during the summer months.

Mr. McIntyre, John, planted them and kept them for Mrs. McIntyre to admire and enjoy.

She was a lovely woman, tethered to an oxygen tank and wheelchair-bound

all the years that I knew her; she was a victim of COPD

and the devastating side effects of smoking.

He was hardy and hale, the caretaker who took seriously his responsibility

of tending to his beloved wife and to his gardens.

If you remember the *Dennis the Menace* cartoon, he was like “good old Mr. Wilson.”

He did the shopping, the cooking, the cleaning, the gardening, all the maintenance
of the house and grounds, as well as the maintenance of his wife,

the lifting and shifting, bathing, dressing, cooking, feeding, transporting,

and on-going day and night care.

They seemed so devoted to one another, so down to earth.

Everything seemed idyllic in their little modular home with the beautiful gardens.

Except that one day, good old Mr. McIntyre died, way too young.
One day, sweet old Mr. McIntyre had a heart attack, brought on, I suppose,
by all the heavy lifting, caring and worry involved in loving his wife.
One day, the hardy and hale one died for the sake of the sick one.
And even though I was still a child at the time, I railed at God
that something was not decent and in order here!
I protested and proclaimed it "not fair," the care-giver dying before the cared-for!
She should have gone first. He wasted the best years of his life on her.
What good is that kind of love?

St. Kevin of Glendalough was an Irish saint who lived from 498-618,
the abbot of Glendalough Monastery who was said to have lived to be 120 years old.
Legend has it that when Kevin was born, his mother felt no labor pains,
and the snow that fell that day melted in a circle around their house—
so extraordinary was this boy-child of hers.
Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet and winner of the Nobel Prize in literature,
relays one folk tale involving St. Kevin and a blackbird,
which tradition claims took place when Kevin was a young boy
studying in a monastery in Cornwall.
It seems that his cell was so small that when Kevin prayed, he was prone
to extend his hands out past the windowsill.
Kevin's love for nature and all animals clearly began early,
which this story confirms. Heaney's version of the tale goes like this:

St. Kevin and the Blackbird

And then there was St. Kevin and the blackbird.
The saint is kneeling, arms stretched out, inside
His cell, but the cell is narrow, so

One turned-up palm is out the window, stiff
As a crossbeam, when a blackbird lands

And lays in it and settles down to nest.

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
Neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
Into the network of eternal life,

Is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
Like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
Until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.

*

And since the whole thing's imagined anyhow,
Imagine being Kevin. Which is he?
Self-forgetful or in agony all the time

From the neck on out down through his hurting forearms?
Are his fingers sleeping? Does he still feel his knees?
Or has the shut-eyed blank of underearth

Crept up through him? Is there distance in his head?
Alone and mirrored clear in love's deep river,
'To labour and not to seek reward,' he prays,

A prayer his body makes entirely
For he has forgotten self, forgotten bird
And on the riverbank forgotten the river's name.

—Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level*

Mr. McIntyre and St. Kevin had a lot in common, I think.
Both being people of faith, they reach out beyond the cells of their own being

to hold in their hands, to handle, to support the lives of others around them,
the fragile lives of those on the fringes of death or birth.

Both are moved to pity by what God places at their fingertips, at their windowpanes,
in their home places, and in responding to the need at hand, literally,
both find themselves *linked into the network of eternal life*,
through *self-forgetting love*.

Both forget themselves entirely; both are in "the zone" of nurture and care
and both suffer greatly for life that holds in the balance under their watch.

Caring does not come without suffering, it seems.

Both are carried along by love's deep river, laboring,
laboring to the point of death, but not seeking reward.

I like Heaney's concept of being linked into the network of eternal life
because I think that is what the passion of Jesus is ultimately about:
Jesus' self-forgetting love that links us to God's self-forgetting love.

The Christ hymn in Philippians 2 could be a prologue to the passion narrative of Jesus.
It certainly is used that way in the lectionary as an introduction
to the Via Dolorosa, the way to the cross.

And the theme of this hymn, this other poem that is more ancient than Paul or Jesus
but from which Paul borrows language to speak of Jesus' self-giving love,
is the Greek word, κένωσις (*kenosis*) or self-emptying, which we find in v. 7,
"but he made himself nothing (he emptied himself)
taking the very nature of a servant."

Kenosis, self-emptying, pouring oneself out, pouring one's health out
for the life-giving nurture and care of another, humbling oneself,
renouncing oneself, humiliating oneself,
giving it all, whatever the cost, *that the fragile may flourish*,
is the moral teaching that Paul wishes to convey
to his friends at Philippi.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ, the hardy and hale one,
who died on behalf of the sick

like Mr. McIntyre, who laid down his life in caring for his wife.
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ, the righteous branch who
trembled and suffered with outstretched arms
to uphold the delicate, the tenuous, the vulnerable,
in order to bring new life into the world,
like St. Kevin who prayed like a tree until baby birds came to life in his hand.
Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ *who links us to the network
of God's eternal life* through his prayerful, self-forgetting love.
In Christ's passion, in his walk to the cross, in his humble obedience to the point of death,
do we find God's clear reflection of love's deep river.
Let us continue that walk together to the cross and beyond. Amen.