

MLK Sunday

Isaiah 62: 1-5

Psalms 36: 5-10

John 2: 1-11

What's With All The Racket?

I found it in a box as I was unpacking and setting up house during our last move,
amidst the vintage wooden Dunlop Maxply's,
the flashy Yonex YY's, the gritty graphite Wilson Pro Staff,
and the extra-length/extra-light Prince Razor,
a plain, unstrung, small-faced wooden Wilson Tony Trabert racquet,
4 5/8 inch grip, with his name label affixed to its neck: Arthur Ashe.

Wow, I said to myself. I didn't even know we had this!

Arthur must have given this to my father when he came to Charlotte
in 1971 to play in a World Championship Tennis Tournament there.

Ashe was a rising star at that time, having broken the race-barrier in being
the first black player allowed to play on the US Davis Cup team in 1963,
and in becoming the first black male to win the US Open in 1968.

Those were Ashe's wooden racquet days, before he would switch to the aluminum
Head Competition racquet and go on to become the first black man
to win Wimbledon in 1975.

But even a rising star, and especially a rising black star had to overcome
tremendous racial obstacles on those days.

Denied access to the premier all-white recreational facility in Richmond,

Ashe honed his tennis skills in Brook Field, the city's park for blacks. And while gaining the accolades and the trophy of the US Open Championship title in 1968, Ashe was denied the \$14,000 purse on a "technicality", allowing it to be given to his Dutch opponent, Tom Okker, instead.

In his memoir, *Days of Grace*, Ashe says,

"Segregation and racism had made me loath aspects of the white South but had left me scarcely less of a patriot.

In fact, to me and my family, winning a place on our national team would mark my ultimate triumph over all those people who opposed my career in the south in the name of segregation.

As a junior in Richmond, I was barred from playing on most of the public tennis courts, which were reserved for whites;

and the most powerful local tennis officials had tried to kill my game by shutting me out of any competition involving whites.

But my game hadn't died....

I saw my Davis Cup appointment as the outstanding honor of my life at that point.

Since no black American had ever been on the team,

I was now a part of history."

(Ashe, Arthur, and Rampersad, Arnold. *Days of Grace*, p. 66)

My father, who was a Jessie Helms Republican

and certainly no freedom rider, ironically was quite taken with Ashe, and believed that Ashe had something extraordinary

to show to Charlotte, which at that time was embroiled deeply
in its own battle to comply with federal court orders

to desegregate and to maintain integrated public schools.

And so he invited Ashe to the Queen City to play in the WCT tournament in 1971,
thinking that the city would certainly embrace Arthur Ashe *as a sign*
of the in-breaking new south that was continuing to unsettle the old deuce score
of separate, but equal.

It seemed like a great idea, and looked good on paper,

until my father tried to take Arthur with him to an up-scale mix and mingle party
for the tennis players and tournament organizers
at one of the local country clubs before the tournament began.

They got as far as the front door, where the door-keepers "politely" told my father
that *he* was welcome to enter, but that his friend was not, club rules, you know;
which created quite a ruckus, quite a racket, knowing my father,
who never backed off easily from any good altercation.

Jesus emerges at the beginning of John's gospel from the fog of baptism,
galvanized by the Spirit which alights on him like a dove, and remains,
according to John the Baptizer's testimony.

It makes me think of that bald eagle, Clark, that landed on the arm of the football
fan at the Clemson v. Notre Dame game over the holidays,
locking onto the man's raised forearm, until its trainer was able
to come and retrieve it; breath-taking!

Equally breath-taking, this inspirited Lamb of God, John twice calls Jesus,

intimating that the ministry of Jesus will be no life of easy access or popularity, but rather that of God's servant, who will suffer with and for the oppressed.

Jesus and his new friends arrive late to the party, to join his mother, Mary, at the wedding festivities. But their arrival creates quite a racket.

Weddings in Jesus' time were known to be drinking parties, and wine was the celebratory drink of choice (Judges 19:4), even in little towns like Cana.

With the arrival of Jesus and his entourage, this particular wedding host, it seems, will not have enough wine for these additional guests;

and no wine equals no happiness in this case.

Perhaps the door-keepers at this great banquet try to bar their entrance, in order *not* to embarrass the host.

But hey it's a party, and Jesus and company have been invited,

so they traipse past the door-keepers, perhaps because

something there is that does not like a door, or a wall, (Frost, Robert. "Mending Wall")

thus tipping the drink balance of the party from sufficiency to scarcity;

and the revelers' affect from happiness to no happiness.

Being attuned and intuitive as she is, Mary alerts Jesus to this volatile issue.

Not someone prone to escalate a tense situation, her words to her son

are indirect and concise to those who overhear them,

yet heart-piercing to this flesh-of-her-own- flesh:

"They *have* no more wine," is all she has to say. (John 2:3)

And so Jesus acts: he takes the side of the poor groom and bride;

he responds to scarcity with abundance, six giant jars of the best of wine;

he saves the groom's family from social disgrace;
he makes sure that everyone has enough wine, and then some;
his wine is for everyone;
he honors the easily ignored servants, whom he makes
secret witnesses to his miracle;
he restores happiness to the celebration;
and then he mixes and mingles with the crowd as if he were one of them,
because he is one of them; God with us, the life of this party!

Friends, this is a happy epiphany, a day of grace,
a revelation of God's way of working in the world,
a sign of the in-breaking Kingdom of God drawing near. Skol! Cheers!

My dad was certainly no saint, but he did know when something was plain wrong,
and especially when someone's feelings were hurt.

He was attuned and intuitive in that way.

So, when the law-abiding door-keepers denied Arthur Ashe access to the party,
my father took him around to the back of the club, up the service elevator,
through the cooks and hired hands in the kitchen,
and into the party, where they joined the other guests.

I'm sure it was humiliating to Arthur Ashe, to be treated like one of the servers;
and I know it was utterly unnerving to my father to have to walk that walk
with the most prominent athlete in the tennis world at that time.

The fact that no one else at the party seemed aware of the mistreatment was
appalling to him; but certainly not lost to the easily-ignored kitchen helpers,

who perhaps were cheering from behind the swinging doors.

So much for the in-breaking of the new South!

So *much* for the in-breaking of God's kingdom!

My father was forever changed by that incident, his eyes having been opened to systemic inequality and cruelty.

But you know, Arthur, being the class act that he was, never complained about that incident, nor did he mention it in his book, as one of many days of *disgrace* that he certainly had to endure.

Nor did he complain about his subsequent heart disease, or the HIV-AIDS that he acquired from a blood transfusion during heart surgery.

Ashe said, "Quite often, people who mean well will inquire of me whether I ever ask myself, in the face of my diseases, 'Why me?'

I never do. If I ask 'Why me?' as I am assaulted by heart disease and AIDS, I must ask 'Why me?' about my blessings, and question my right to enjoy them.

The morning after I won Wimbledon in 1975, I should have asked 'Why me?' and doubted I deserved the victory.

If I don't ask 'Why me?' after my victories, I cannot ask 'Why me?' after my setbacks and disasters...God's will alone matters, not my personal desires or needs.

When I played tennis, I never prayed for victory in a match.

I will not pray now to be cured of heart disease or AIDS."

(Ashe and Rampersad. *Days of Grace*, p. 326)

Neither did Jesus complain about the paucity of wine at the wedding party,
or about the raised eyebrows of his mother,
nor did he brag about his part in making things right.

It was just the way things were going to be from now on,
as God's Holy Spirit guided him to add *GRACE*
to the guest list of every social function.

Both men spent their tragically truncated lives actively rejecting
all separatist situations and arguments, and tirelessly working
to open doors, to enlarge and enliven gatherings, and to embody
God's grace-filled world, one day at a time.

Says Biblical scholar Eugene Peterson, "The grace of God means something like:
Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party
wouldn't be complete without you.

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.

I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us.

We live in a grace-filled world!" Thanks be to God. Amen.

(Peterson, Eugene. *Tell it Slant*, p. 184)

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