



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - February 12, 2017 Sermon

Ye Shall Have a Song: What Mashal/Touchstone is in Your Wallet? Or on Your Refrigerator? Or In Your Heart?

Isaiah 30:27-33

Words lead the soul.—Plato, *Phaedrus*

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.—Deuteronomy 11:18-21

Sometimes, I like to preach to the choir. I don't mean in the normal sense of that phrase: working very hard to convince people of something they're already thoroughly convinced of—although maybe I do that too. No, I mean I like to have my sermon lead into—set up, connect with—what the choir is singing (a few weeks back I did this with the anthem, *Deep River*). I do this because I've noticed that the moments I feel closest to God are often when the choir is singing, and I'm guessing I'm not alone in that. So if my words can help set that up, deepen it—well, that's a good thing.

So some weeks back, I went down to John's office to find out what the anthem would be for today:

"Ye Shall Have a Song," he says. "It was written for the Westminster Choir; Donald Busarow wrote it; he taught at Wittenberg, and was also the university organist and choir director.

"Wait! Wait! I think it's on our first CD."

So John pulls out the first Westminster Choir CD, and pops it in his CD player: the whole anthem is on a single verse in the Book of Isaiah: Isaiah: chapter 30: verse 29 in the King James Version:

Ye shall have a song as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart as one goeth with a pipe to come into the mountain of the Lord. Ye shall have a song!

It starts off meditatively (the night of holy solemnity) but then grows stronger and stronger (gladness of heart as with a pipe coming to the mountain of the Lord), and it's beautiful. I'm elated: Ye shall have a sermon for February 12th!

But then, back in my office: I read not just verse 29, but all of chapter 30, and all my elation disappears. Isaiah 30 is not a happy chapter. Nor are the chapters around it. These chapters are full of trial and tribulation, smoke and fire, destruction and damnation, God's vengeance and God's wrath. Amidst all that, verse 29 sticks out like a sore thumb. No, wrong metaphor: verse 29 . . . well, imagine a mountainside after a wildfire has ravaged it: nothing but ashes and a few burned, jagged shards of trees sticking up out of the charred ground, and there on that mountainside blooms a single rose. That rose is verse 29. And all I could think as I stood there was, "What was Donald Busarow thinking? Why did he pluck out this verse and set it to music?" I'll try to answer that question a little later, but for now, I'll read from Isaiah chapter 30 verses 27-33.

[Isaiah 30:27-33]

Words lead the soul. They get inside us, shape us, become part of our lives, part of who we are. I was in sem-

inary, going to the nursing home for the first time to lead worship—on the memory care unit. Although I didn't know enough at the time to say this, on the dementia scale of one to seven, everyone there would be a six or a seven. But I knew enough to be a little nervous, "How do I do this?"

"Here's a bulletin, keep the sermon short, Joan will meet you there to play the piano."

In one way, it was easy—if I messed something up, nobody noticed. In another way, it was hard: many slept with their heads lolling, some moaned, some kept saying—or shouting—the same thing over and over again. It was unspeakably sad, and nothing I was saying seemed to change that. Until I started in on the Lord's Prayer: ". . . who taught us how to pray, by saying, Our Father, who art in heaven. . ."

I tell you at that moment I knew how Ezekiel felt when he saw, in that dry valley, dem bones, dem dry bones, get up and dance. They were joining in, they were all joining in, by the time we got to "for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever"—the prayer was ringing through the room. Those words, the words of the Lord's Prayer, had gotten inside them when they were young, and now, even at the end of their lives, with all other memory gone, those words came out unbidden. Words lead the soul, shape us, and become part of our lives. But even when the words come to us later in life, even when we speak them as an act of will, maybe especially then, they become part of who we are.

He came in, sat down next to the desk of our administrative assistant for pastoral care, and declared, "I want to plan my funeral." His name was Charles; he looked like he was in his 40's, a little pale, drawn, and thin, but still a good-looking, strong-looking man. He wasn't a member, but had been coming to our Sunday evening services. Pat, the administrative assistant, listened to his story, and then said, "You need to talk to Richard."

He was a biomedical engineer. He didn't make a big deal of it, but he was obviously smart, successful, and had access to the best medical care. And the doctors had just told him there was nothing more they could do. And then he fixed me with a look: "Please don't talk to me about the five stages of grief." I told him I hadn't planned to, and then . . . well, I don't know how it came up, we had been talking about his church background (he had gone as a kid, growing up, but never as an adult), about the way we can—how the church can—misunderstand and misrepresent who and what God is. I had been listening to C.S. Lewis' book, *The Screwtape Letters*, where the unnamed devil writing the letters quotes Psalm 16: *You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.*

These words make the devil mad. He quotes them with a spitting peevishness: how dare God give pleasures to human beings, those weak, disgusting, featherless bipeds! How dare God care about their happiness! But to Charles, these words were words of hope.

As I said, I'm not sure why I said I them (looking back on it I'm sure it was the Holy Spirit) but when I said them, they spoke directly to Charles: He had never before thought of God as creating pleasures for us, for the fullness of our joy, for our life, for our life—forevermore.

Whenever I went to see him—because he had been young and strong, it took him much longer than expected to die, and by the end it was bad—whenever I went to see him, through all the pain and all the drugs, even when he could hardly speak—whenever I went to see him, he'd give me this wry smile, and lift his right hand, and we both knew what that meant: in his right hand are pleasures forevermore—it meant hope.

I still think of Charles and those words often, when I'm stuck in a meeting or in traffic. Should I end up in the memory care unit, somewhere deep inside me, still part of me, will be those words, will be Charles, his smile, him lifting his hand. In his right hand are pleasures forevermore. Those words have become a touchstone for me. Words become a touchstone for us when we return to them again and again, and feel that we need to return to them again and again in order to remember who and what we are, to find the courage to be what we were meant to be, to heed the better angels of our nature.

That's the way the wisdom tradition works: we hear certain words, and they speak to us: we remember them, they get inside us, shape us, become part of our lives, part of who we are. And the characteristic way of expressing those memorable words in the wisdom tradition is in a two-part wisdom sentence, a "mishal" in Hebrew, which we translate as "proverb." There are wisdom books in the Bible, including, obviously enough, the Book of Proverbs. But those words are not just in the Bible; they're also on our refrigerators.

The Bible puts it this way: You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead . . . Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. But today, for many of us . . . well we put them on our refrigerators or keep them in our wallets. And always, always we hold them in our hearts. And these two-part wisdom sentences are by no means found only in the Bible.

"Endure my heart, endure, you have endured worse than this." That's what the ancient Greek hero Odysseus says when he returns home, alone, disguised as a beggar, after ten years fighting at Troy and ten more years adventure and wandering to get home, only to find his home overrun by his rivals who, thinking him long dead, are vying to steal his wife and everything he has. He's furious: he's a warrior, and his honor has been violated. But he's in no position to fight now: he's badly outnumbered. The man who conquered giants and monsters must now conquer his own rage and pride to wait for the right moment. "Endure my heart, endure, you have endured worse than this." It's a touchstone for self-command, the virtue necessary to exercise all virtues.

"If I perish, I perish." That's what the Biblical heroine Queen Esther says. She's all of 16 years old when she promises her Uncle Mordecai that she will plead the cause of her people before the Persian king. Here people are the Jewish exiles in Persia, who are about to be wiped out by order of that Persian king, King Xerxes I, who is capricious, easily manipulated, not the sharpest knife in the drawer, and prone to excess in drink. Add to that the Persian law that anyone approaching the king unbidden shall be put to death. "If I perish, I perish." It's a touchstone for courage and trust in God.

"Wax on, wax off." That's what Mr. Miyagi says to Daniel, the Karate Kid, in the movie, *The Karate Kid*. Daniel has been beaten up by bullies—bullies who work out at the local karate studio. Daniel wants to get them back. Mr. Miyagi agrees to teach Daniel karate, but first warns him that karate is not for vengeance. And then he tells him to wash and wax his cars (he has lots of cars), and then sand his deck, and then paint his house, and then paint his fence. After days and days of work, Daniel's had enough; He's supposed to be learning karate, not doing slave labor. What he doesn't realize (but what Mr. Miyagi will soon show him) is that all this work has developed the muscles—and the muscle memory!—essential for the basic moves of karate. "Wax on, wax off"—it's a touchstone for patience, perseverance, humility, and obedience.

Touchstones—we have them not just as individuals but also as a people, as a nation.

When Lincoln delivers *The Gettysburg Address*, he invokes the Declaration of Independence—the famous opening "Four score and seven years ago" means 1776—and he then quotes the Declaration of Independence: "a new nation, conceived in liberty, dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln invokes the Declaration as a touchstone: words we must return to again and again to remember who and what we are, to find courage to be what we were meant to be, to listen to the better angels of our nature. Martin Luther King Jr. did the same thing: in his I Have a Dream speech, he touches on the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bible: "we will not be satisfied until 'justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.'"

Ronald Reagan, in his Farewell Address, spoke of a America as "a city upon a hill, a beacon, a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home." And Barak Obama in his Farewell Address, also invoked the Declaration of Independence and then closed with, "Yes, we can, yes we can."

Touchstones—they speak to us because they come from love: The goddess Athena loves Odysseus: at that very moment she comes to him, also disguised, to teach him self-command; for Esther it is the love of her Uncle Mordecai, the love of her people, and ultimately the love of God. For Daniel, the love of Mr. Miyagi. For Lincoln, King, Reagan, and Obama it was love of country and the living ideals of this country.

Touchstones come from love, and they become particularly memorable when set to music.

On the memory unit that day, after we finished the Lord's Prayer, I looked over at Joan, and she began to play Jesus Loves Me—and if possible, that was even more dramatic. They were all singing, with a quivering fervor that I could feel in my dry bones. "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong."

Touchstones become particularly memorable when set to music. Which brings me back to today's anthem. I can't prove this of course, but I think Donald Busarow set verse 29 to music so it could become a touchstone to give us hope.

Remember this and do not forget: put it on the doorposts of your house and on your gates; put it on your refrigerator, keep it in your wallet; hold it in your heart; no matter what trials and tribulations beset you, remember this and do not forget: Ye shall have a song.

500 years ago this year, in the year 1517, a young professor of theology named Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses (challenging many of the practices of the church at that time) on the door at Wittenberg University (the one in Germany not in Springfield). To understate the matter, this caused a good deal of trial and tribulation. In fact, in subsequent years, Luther found himself on trial for his life before various tribunals. He was facing not only execution (being burned at the stake) but execution under a ban of excommunication, which meant (in the understanding of the day) that he faced eternal damnation and hellfire.

But Luther had a touchstone: every time he stood before a tribunal, before he began to speak, he would touch his finger to his forehead, saying to himself, "I am baptized."

Luther remembered his baptism as a touchstone—to remember who and what he was, to find the courage to be what he was meant to be, to heed the better angels of his nature—to remember and not forget that he was a beloved child of God.

"I am baptized." It's a touchstone, for . . . well, for this: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Touchstones speak to us because they come from love. I am baptized comes from this: "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong."

Ye shall have a song.

"I am baptized." Put these words in your heart and soul, bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead . . . Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates; put them on your refrigerator; keep them in your wallet; hold them in your heart; no matter what trials and tribulations beset you, remember this and do not forget: "I am baptized."

Ye shall have a song.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen