**Vestry Sunday Sermon**

**By Joe Wright**

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

When I told my sister that I would be preaching to you today, she dared me to work the expression “holy moly” into the sermon.  Now here, not more than two sentences into it, I have won a hot fudge sundae by merely telling you this story.

As many of you know, I am a teacher.  It is from this point of view that I will speak.  In my teaching, I draw upon three tools in order to be effective.  I draw upon my love and passion for music, a genuine interest and compassion for my students, and a great deal of metaphor and symbolism.  In twenty-five years of teaching, I have found that these are essential for a successful connection with the students, and their connection to that which I intend for them to learn.

Love and passion is essential because I am thus a model to them for the value of music.  If they don’t see my connection to it, it is less likely that they will see its importance.  I love to play, and I love to listen, and I make sure they know this, not by telling them, but simply by doing it.  I perform with groups outside of school, not the least of which is the wonderful choir.  I tell them about concerts and recitals that I saw over the weekend.  I try to attend their performances outside of school, and I practice at school, once in while getting caught in the act, I hope.

Interest and compassion are also key, because I need my students to know that I am a stakeholder in their success.  I strive to always be present in their learning.  I need them to feel that it means as much to me as it should to them for us to reach our objective.  I know personally that when I set goals for myself, the chances of success are far greater if someone else stands to gain from my reaching that goal, and even more so if it is someone with whom I share a genuine affection.

Symbolism and metaphor are a big “go to” for me.  Much of education is built on the notion that we can only compare new stimulus to that which our brain has already processed.  New ideas and concepts must be put into a context that allows us to use what we know and understand to synthesize and process that which we do not yet.  It is a joyful moment when such realization or epiphany takes place, and it feeds a fire that is hungry for more such moments.

It is hardly a stretch to look at Jesus as a teacher.  Almost every image we have of him in the time leading up to His Passion is that of the rabbi, teaching his disciples, modeling a love of God, cultivating a love for them, and helping them understand the Word of God through stories that help them connect that Word with that which they already know, have already experienced.  It is also well known that there were many times when these were not easy to achieve.

In any of the four gospels, we read of Jesus’ love and devotion to God, one so great that he finds the strength to withstand any temptation that is put in his way.  His love and passion for that which He taught pulled him through this in a way that we mortals would have a very hard time understanding without seeing.

His love for his disciples, for anyone he encountered, for each of us and for all of mankind: when one opens his or her heart to this love, it is powerful, and fills one with an energy and a drive that points us in the right direction and keeps us moving forward.

And finally, Christ was a storyteller.  Often without first trying to explain the point of the story, he begins the parable.  He tells stories of kindness, forgiveness, humility, love, and goodness.  He allows that discovery to happen in the midst of the story.  He tells them from the point of view of people whom his disciples easily might know in their daily lives.  He shows them how a love for God is possible, how a genuine caring for each other can happen, and how the two are one in the same.

Stories upon stories, deed after deed, one day after another, he helps them to understand.  They were not so much given a list of rules to memorize.  They were showed the impact that their how they live their lives could have on people, one way or the other.  His modeling and teaching and love never let up, not even through his darkest hours, and they still go on today.  They compel us here to gather weekly and ponder them, and to act in His name, two-thousand years later.

That is some pretty impressive teaching.

About four years ago, I was sorting a pile of band music I had collected from my students right at the end of the school year.  I happened upon a tattered cardboard band folder that was filled almost completely on the inside with a list of imagery and analogy that had come flying out of my mouth over the course of several years of band class.  It was quite an experience to sit down with a cup of coffee and read a digest of what parts of my teaching had made an impact over the last several years.

Now, one of my pet peeves as a teacher is the student who will then feel a duty to raise his or her hand with a forensic work-up on the validity of my metaphor.  I freely admit that my aversion to this may well be rooted in the fact that I was that kid thirty or more years ago.

I think the key to survival in my class is to have faith that if they have no idea what he meant by that, it still may have been something important.  When I start going off on what looks like a wild tangent, I get the sense that most of my students are waiting to see where this goes.  I feel like I have them when I do that.  That takes a little while to build.  I need to give me the benefit of the doubt that despite the occasional inconsistency in the logic, and absorb the message.

In short, the key to survival in my classroom is to hold faith that there is a purpose to all this.

I don’t understand every parable entirely, but I think most of the time I get the point.  The story this morning of Mary anointing Jesus with expensive oils and Judas’ objection has always perplexed me a little.  I see both sides of that one, but I have faith that his message is an important one.  These are all stories that are over two-thousand years old and have been translated from one language into another and eventually into a very old version of our own.

Even I were to be asked to accept every word of scripture as divine truth, I am still likely to question the divinity of my ability to understand them.  Many of you have certainly heard the about Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of St. Paul’s Cathedral giving a tour of the new building to Queen Anne, to have it described as awful, artificial, amateur, and amusing.  Without looking into this very deeply, we are likely to find her comments harsh, inappropriate, and perhaps even altogether wrong.  It is really more to the point that these words have ever so slightly different meanings.  The idea is the same, but they are now more often a pejorative.  At the time, she meant them as great praise.  Awful meaning “filling one with awe”; artificial meaning “art, an artifice, a great work of human hands”; amateur meaning “a labor of love”; and amusing meaning “inspired by the muses”.  It is just such shifts in language that are just one more thing standing in our way between a full understanding of our history, our past.

In my journey of faith, I strive to understand the point of what I read and hear.  Why was it said, and why was it written.  It doesn’t take a particularly scholarly or learned person to find, amid so many ideas and multiple translations of them, a number or passages that run up against each other, or against those parts of the world of which we have learned quite recently in the grand scheme of things.  It takes a wise and faithful person to seek its meaning, its message, and to live by them.

The musical “Godspell” was pretty new when I saw a performance from its national tour.  I was pretty new as well.  I could not have been more than five or six.  It got me off to such a great start into a journey of faith.  It was funny, it was exciting, it was full of conflict and resolution and happiness and sadness.  I watched Jesus in Superman shirt teach his friends by making them laugh, and cry, and angry, and overjoyed, and the whole experience helped me understand the Passion and Resurrection like nothing has since.

I recall being riveted to the cast carrying Jesus up the center aisle after his crucifixion, wistfully singing “Love live God”, and it being juxtaposed with “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord” from the very beginning of the show, and low and behold, Jesus’ friends run back on to the stage singing and dancing with a joy I had not yet seen that night, and bowing to the applause, when suddenly Jesus ran back down to the front of the house, hopped right up on the stage, and joined them in the bowing and dancing.  He had risen.  Through rock music and clown costumes, I had been given a wonderful message, one that has remain pretty much unchanged as I gained a   clearer understanding of the details of the Gospels.

So, to the extent that any of this makes sense, it leaves us with a choice.  I don’t think I can blindly accept everything I hear and read at face value.  Genesis alone is one head-scratcher after another.  I can’t be the only one who has ever thought that, even if we are all descended from Adam and Eve, isn’t it all sort of moot since the whole lineage starts over with Noah and Joan, or whatever his wife’s name was.  I don’t recall that ever coming up.

I don’t believe that God put us on this earth to blindly accept anything, but blindly isn’t the only way to have faith.  I have found that you can intellectually draw connections and consistencies with virtually everything that we are taught in the church, and everything that we learn through our own observation and of those scientists before us.  I find that difficult, but exhilarating.  There are essayists and comedians that feign a great intellectual depth in pointing out the intuitive absurdities.  You can make a very good living by appearing insightful while shooting fish in a barrel.  I believe the real depth of intellect is seeking common ground between what we learn and what we have always known.

No matter what the great cosmic clock said when the earth was created, and no matter what shape that earth takes in space, these teachings can inspire and enrich us, and be no less true to us as humans as ever before.  If things don’t add up, and there are still vast differences between what you hear in these pews and what you see on the Learning Channel, then it’s ok to keep faith, and continue to seek a way to comprehend it.

I’m sure many of you saw the heartwarming side story to the election of Pope Francis in which a seagull had landed on the chimney coming out of the Sistine Chapel shortly before the emergence of while smoke, reminiscent of the dove that sits on the hand of statues of St. Francis of Assisi, as potentially a sign of the name the new pope would choose.

I don’t know, but I bet that seagulls are no strangers to the roofs of buildings in Rome.  It may well have been more of a miracle if the huge crowd gathered with there eyes peeled on that chimney waiting for that puff of smoke without having seen a seagull land on it at some point.  It takes no real effort to dismiss the significance of that bird if that’s what you choose to do.  My heart would rather see it as a sign.  I would rather think that there are signs all around us.  Maybe every seagull on every roof is in some way a gift from God.  We just need to be ready to see them.  We need to have our heart open to them.

Signs of the Holy Spirit surround us, and when our heart is ready to see them, there they are.  There are plenty of influences in our lives that might compel us to explain them away.  That’s much easier than accepting it, even without yet being able to explain it.  My personal journey into faith does not stop at blind acceptance of everything I hear and ready, but neither does it stop at explaining everything away with logic and sequence and science that seems to disprove what isn’t so much what we’ve read or heard, but our collective impression of it.

Dear Lord, we come to the last two weeks of a time when we are called to give you a greater level of meditation and prayer that at any other time in the year.  Open our hearts to your teaching, to your signs, to your love.  Allow our hearts to be open to your glory.  Guide us through the times where we do not yet possess all the wisdom to understand you, and give us the courage and drive to begin that understanding with faith.  In Jesus name, our great teacher, we ask this.

Amen.