

“Brief Remarks on the Labor Day Sunday Hymns”
A Sermon Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
August 31, 2008 – Labor Day Sunday & Hymnfest Sunday
and Based on Matthew 16:21-28 and the Hymns “Day by Day,” “Lift Up
Your Voice and Sing,” “Christ the Worker,” and “Jesu, Jesu”
by the Rev. Scott O. Stapleton

This past week I read a blog with the intriguing title “Wretched Urgency: The Grace of God or Hamsters on a Wheel?” The author, it seems, is a recovering Southern Baptist evangelical, or, in his own words, a fundamentalistic Southern Baptist Arminian revivalist. I do not normally connect with Southern Baptist evangelicals. One of my brothers-in-law on my wife’s side is such a beast, but we rarely talk. He’s up in Alaska, and that’s fine with me. He’s a nice enough fellow—so long as we don’t talk about religion. This blog, however, was different. When I read the title, I knew I could talk with this fellow and would want to.

‘Wretched urgency’ is the burden evangelicals in general carry for being evangelical. Their beliefs, you see, compel them to witness to ‘the lost,’ preferably in hostile territory, and 24/7. If they do not spend every waking moment of their lives doing this, some poor soul will go straight to hell and they will be responsible. Imagine having that on your conscience. “You can’t feel bad enough,” the author wrote. You always feel like you have to put down your cup of coffee and sign up for your How to Witness class, and be off!

And then it began to dawn on the author that all of this could very well be beside the point, that the Christian life might just be a call to know God and not Grow the Church, or Else!

I cannot say more about how he came to this realization, for our time is short. If you’re interested, Google “wretched urgency” and I’m sure you’ll find the piece. Or, if you wish, ask me and I’ll be happy to provide you with a copy. Right now, what I want to highlight is his characterization of the Christian life he knew best, namely, the wretchedly urgent Christian life. It was more like a hamster on a wheel than the people of God resting in the grace of their Lord.

It’s not much of a life, is it? If this is the burden—if this is the labor God calls us to perform, then perhaps we ought to consider another calling.

It’s time to consider another characterization of the Christian life, one less strenuous. Let us not stand and sing the first two verses of “Day by Day.” It’s on pages 9 and 10 of your bulletin.

[hymn]

Lovely, yes? Does it describe your week? It doesn't even come close to mine. Mine was dominated by our security system, which kept tripping even though there was no fire. Each time it went off, I would dash to the control panel, reset the box, and call ADT and say, "Don't call the fire department! Or anyone else, for that matter!" And they would say, "Thank you, Mr. Stapleton. Is there any other way we can help you today?" To which I wanted to say, "Yes! You can straighten out this cursed security system!" but what I actually said was, "No, thank you; just send a repairman as soon as you can."

The hymn we've just sung cannot speak to my circumstances, much less far greater trials, because it has no backbone. It is gentle to a fault. It offers soothing reassurances for minor scrapes and bruises, but nothing for more serious injuries. There is a brief attempt to meet the enemy head on in the middle of the piece—"he whose heart is kind beYOND ALL MEASURE"—but kindness is still the goal, not justice, and certainly not righteous indignation. The hymn portrays God in his heaven, *mingling* pain and pleasure, and we're supposed to rest in that knowledge.

Contrast this hymn with John Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing"—the first verse of hymn no. 599.

[hymn]

Now, there's a hymn with backbone. Lots of backbone! In the second verse, which we did not sing, even the blood of the martyrs is invoked. This is the Christian life at its most dramatic and its most taxing, but different in kind and character from 'wretched urgency.' Truly, this is taking up your cross and following Jesus, cost what it may—and all of it set to music meant to stir our souls. The brothers Johnson were known for their Broadway musicals when this hymn was written in 1900. And this, too, has the same drive, the same sense of uplift. Originally composed for schoolchildren in Jacksonville, Florida, to commemorate the birthday of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, the song quickly took on a life of its own. By the late 1940s, it was being sung by African-Americans throughout the United States as the Negro National Anthem. The Civil Rights era of the '60s only solidified its status as *the* expression of liberation from oppression. "March on, till victory is won" it says, and we respond with renewed hope and zeal.

I do like this hymn. It is powerful. But how many of us can live on a steady diet of renewed hope and zeal? The hope, I hope we never lose. But the zeal? If this was our only fare, I can well imagine the return of the hamster wheel. What we need is something to pace ourselves. We need a proper goal—not a life of ease amidst pillows of pain and pleasure, toil and rest, but a kingdom come that demands urgency, just not an urgency

that drains us. Let me recommend hymn no. 611, "Christ the Worker," verses 1, 4 and 5.

[hymn]

This is a remarkable hymn, one perfectly suited for our Labor Day reflections. The music is a traditional work song from southern Africa, but the words were written expressly for a Christian work camp in northern Ghana sometime prior to 1968 when it was first collected in a hymnbook. It's a 'call and response' hymn. A task master sets the rhythm and the pace; our job is to follow. There's a temptation on our part to speed up, or slow down, or to miss the dotted quarter note, or the steadiness of the eighth notes. But if we're paying attention to the one in charge, we get the hang of it soon enough, and then we, too, become workers for God.

The hymn does more than set an appropriate pace; it gives us something to think about while we're working, in this case, the life of Christ. He was born to work and die for every one, it tells us. He grew in wisdom and in skill; he praised God while laboring at his bench; he learned to fashion a yoke that made the labor less. These are thoughts worth thinking about. Ghana, you may be interested to know, is a country that thrives on such thoughts. It is obsessed, as one traveler put it, with Jesus and the Bible (www.moxon.net/ghana/the_road_to_jesus.html). In the Elmina market, the wooden produce boxes are stamped "Father, forgive them," "Cry your own cry," "Who is free?" and "Clap for Jesus." Businesses sport signs such as "The Opener of Closed Doors Hair Salon," and "God Will Provide Engineering Supplies," and "More Grace Estate." The latter, the author noted, was on a busy and polluted highway that could use more grace.

Ghanaians, in short, are prone to wearing their faith on their sleeves. This ought to raise in us, once again, alarms. Do we have here yet another case of excessive zeal, a shameless rush to blend God and mammon? There is not an easy answer to this question. Temptations surround them, to be sure, but so do they, us. Still, I take heart from our closing hymn which is also from Ghana. It is called "Chereponi," after the region from which it came. Chereponi the region is a dry and dusty land in northeastern Ghana. It is ill-suited for farming, the rainy season notwithstanding. Subsistence farming is the norm, and there is a great deal of rural poverty—that, and malaria and typhoid. Nevertheless, it this people that has given us a hymn whose pace and content perfectly characterize the Christian life. Let us conclude by singing the first and last verses of hymn no. 602, "Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love, show us how to serve the neighbors we have from you."

Amen.