

Devotions – May 22-28, 2016
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Sunday, May 22, 2016

Text: I Thessalonians 2:12

...encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into the kingdom and glory.

One of my favorite hymns is *I Love to Tell the Story*. There is a basic simplicity to the music, both in tune and message. In the cluttered world in which we live it is a relief to be able to turn to something so clearly comforting as this song. The familiar music tells me that I don't have to struggle to read notes or learn yet another unfamiliar tune. That is always a comfort but the real comfort in the hymn comes in the story it tells. It captures the basic truths of the Christian faith. The Story referred to we might also call The Good News. Why do we believe? As the song says, "Because we know it is true."

Let us Pray: *Lord, let us continue to sing this wonderful song and remain faithful to its message. Amen.*



Monday, May 23, 2016

Text: Matthew 5:4

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Every once in a while you might hear a story that staggers your imagination about the strength of a person's faith. One such story has to do with the hymn *It is Well with My Soul* or as it is sometime labeled *When Peace Like A River*. It has a powerful message but at the same time it is a soothing hymn. A favorite of our family to the degree that it was chosen as one of the hymns sung at Mother's funeral.

In 1873 Horatio Spafford arranged to have his wife and four daughters sail to Europe. He was unable to travel with them but arranged to follow as soon as he could settle some business matters. These matters were part of the aftermath of his devastating financial losses caused by the great Chicago Fire of 1872. This grief was added to the recent loss of their two year old son. His life was in a shambles. The trip to Europe was intended to try to start anew.

The ship carrying his wife and girls hit another in mid-ocean and sank. The four girls drowned and Spafford received a cablegram from his wife saying "Saved alone....."

He took another ship across the Atlantic and when the Captain pointed out the spot where he had lost his girls Spafford went to his cabin and wrote the lyrics to *It is Well with My Soul*.

You would be well served to read the rest of Horatio Spafford's story. The hymn has six verses that constitute one of the strongest testimonies of faith you will ever read.

Let us Pray: *Lord let us own just a portion of the faith of this man who was so challenged by adversity but never wavered in his belief in the risen Christ. Amen.*



Tuesday, May 24, 2016

Text: Ephesians 2:8

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.

Most all have by now heard the story of John Newton, the author of the classic hymn *Amazing Grace*. As a former captain of a ship that transported slaves he came to Christ and spoke of his conversion through the words of his song. It has always seemed to me that the power of many hymn lyrics is made all that much stronger if we know the story of their origins. Newton wrote other hymns as well but none come close to the strength of the story in his most famous. A wretch of the lowest order was saved by the power of God's love manifested through grace. His epitaph reads, in part, " John Newton, clerk, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ rescued, preserved, pardoned....."

In his life he went on to become an effective and well known member of the clergy. The life story of Newton is remarkable for many things but the greatest was his legacy as left to us in the words of his beloved hymn.

Let us Pray: *Lord, lead us to understand the selfless love you pour out upon us in the gift of grace. May we, too, believe that grace will lead us home. Amen.*



Wednesday, May 25, 2016

Text: Acts 13:38

Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed unto you.

It is fair to assume that eventually every great song of faith ends up in a hymnal sometime somewhere. Then again there may be some question about that when you consider songs that are viewed as “popular” or too obviously secular. Perhaps there will always be the debate over whether a song is “sacred” enough to be considered a true hymn. As with the first three in this series of devotions our fourth work to consider is best appreciated when we know the back story.

Kris Kristofferson is one of the most prolific and successful songwriters of the last 40 years or so. His verses read like poetry as his songs often tell the story of his life – a story of great highs and even greater lows.

Some years ago, during one of the low periods, another singer, Connie Smith, asked Kris to attend church with her. He was not a regular churchgoer but agreed to join her. While there he said he had a profound religious experience. When the preacher asked if anyone in the congregation was willing to accept Christ, Kristofferson found himself compelled to move to the front of the church. When the preacher blessed him and laid hands on him he said he felt this immense sense of release. He also enjoyed a strong feeling of forgiveness that he said he hadn't realized he needed.

The song *Why Me Lord* emerged from this experience and though it may not find its way into a hymnal it is as strong a testimonial to the love of God as you will find anywhere. If you don't know it, find it and listen. It is a statement of witness.

Let us Pray: *Lord, we too might ask why me Lord? What have we ever done to deserve your love and forgiveness? Let us also tell others of the trials we've gone through as we try to find our way to you. Help us, Lord. Our souls are in your hand. Amen.*



Thursday, May 26, 2016

Text: Ephesians 4:2

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Years ago in discussion with a friend, an ordained pastor in the United Brethren church, he offered the observation that if you were ignorant of the life of Christ and you were to consider the hymns in most hymnals you would think them a collection of either love songs or songs of war. I believe his two examples were; *Jesus Lover of My Soul* and *Onward Christian Soldiers*.

Considering that you'll not find many, if any militant hymns, in our current hymnals we must note a change in attitude within the church regarding how best to relate to the people of God. The emphasis now, in our music, focuses on the loving side of the imagery of Christ. Given the harsh violence we witness on the news, seemingly every day, in the name of religious militancy it is little wonder that people seem welcoming of this change.

Times and tempers change and so must the church in its expressions of faith adapt to remain relevant.

Let us Pray: Lord, help us to change and adapt to the new realities that we face in an ever changing world. Allow us the strength to remain constant in our convictions of faith as we meet each new day. Amen.



Friday, May 27, 2016

Text: Hebrews 2:12

I will declare your name to my brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to you.

Growing up in a Suomi Synod church much of my time was spent listening to the service conducted in Finnish. Like most children of my generation I had almost no ability to understand the words but the music was always something I could appreciate; to this day I retain many of those tunes and some of the lyrics.

One of the strongest memories of those times is that of the singing of Hoosianna at the beginning of the Lenten season. The choir would be in procession up the aisle and the congregation would stand in respect to the idea of Jesus entering Jerusalem, a ride that ultimately led him to the Cross and all of us to salvation.

I had always assumed the song to be Finnish but over the years learned otherwise. It was originally written by Abbe' Vogler in 1795 and was incorporated into the Advent services in Sweden, Norway and Finland. Apparently, it remains a traditional part of those services and is hymn number 1 in the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church hymnal.

I'm sure that the song, its tune and story triggers like memories in the minds of others who share the times of my childhood.

Let us Pray: Lord, thank you for the privilege of a life in which strong positive memories of time spent among family, friends and fellow worshippers can stay with us and bolster our faith. The music that was played then and sung to the glory of God provides an ongoing comfort and enjoyment. Amen.



Saturday, May 28, 2016

Text: Romans 15:9

...and moreover that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing praises of your name."

People measure their passage through life in a variety of ways. Age is an obvious one but there are many others as well. Since we are speaking of church related matters I'll mention that one of the things I've measured over time is the change in hymnals. As a child I had access to two different songbooks. Neither of them had notes but rather just the words to the hymns. The black one had English words and the green one had Finnish. As I grew older I began to use The Service Hymnal which was published in 1952. Then as the Suomi Synod merged into the LCA which then became part of the ELCA there were a series of hymnal changes; the green, red and cranberry along with blue With One Voice.

If you want to witness the changing nature of our church the hymnal journey is quite a reflection. Many of the songs we sing now come from a far more diverse source. The Church is far more global in its reach and concerns. We have always been a welcoming body and our institutional music collection reflects how much we embrace whomever may come to us.

Not everyone is 100% happy with so much change in things. I happen to be somewhat of a traditionalist, others might use the term stick-in-the-mud. I wince every time I notice yet another old classic hymn didn't make the cut in the new hymnal. On the other hand some of them made way for some truly wonderful new hymns that we might never had seen. Change is never easy but it is the only way to grow.

Let us Pray: *Lord, provide us the courage to accept and value change. At the same time give us the wisdom to retain the valuable in the old and allow us to move forward with the best of both. Amen.*

