

## THE TOUCH OF THE MASTER'S HAND

It was battered and scarred, and the auctioneer  
thought it scarcely worth his while  
to waste much time on the old violin,  
but held it up with a smile.  
“What am I bid, good folks?” he cried.  
“Who’ll start the bidding for me?  
A dollar, a dollar, -now two, only two?  
Two dollars, and who’ll make it three?  
Three dollars once, three dollars twice, going for three...

But no! From the room far back a gray-haired man came forward and picked up the bow; Then wiping the dust  
from the old violin, and tightening up all of the strings,  
he played a melody pure and sweet, As sweet as an angel sings:

*[at this point, I play something on the violin – often the Ave Maria]*

The music ceased, and the auctioneer, with a voice that was quiet and low,  
Said: “What am I bid for the old violin?” And he held it up with the bow.  
A thousand dollars, - and who’ll make it two? Two thousand, and who’ll make it three?  
Three thousand once, and three thousand twice and going and gone!” said he.  
The people cheered, but some of them cried,  
“What changed its worth?” The man replied,

### ***THE TOUCH OF THE MASTER'S HAND!***

And many a one with life out of tune and battered and torn with sin  
Is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd, much like the old violin.

A bag of pot, a glass of wine, a game and he travels on.  
She’s going, once, he’s going twice, she’s going and almost gone.

But the Master comes and the foolish crowd never can quite understand  
The worth of a soul and the change that’s wrought  
By the touch of the Master’s hand.

Written by Myra Brooks Welch (adapted slightly by Peter Chepaitis)  
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I never get tired of telling that story - because I experience something different every time I tell it. Those who hear it are at a new place in their lives each time and the world has changed even since the last time I did it, which was at a Parish Mission in Tuxedo, NY, last July. I told it here in Fort Plain in 2010 as part of a weekend of healing into hope

That story is, for me, one way of telling the story of what we celebrate every Advent and Christmas. We need to hear the Gospel story over and over again, in as many forms as possible, because we are always on the way to the promise of the coming of Christ. We live between the time of the first coming of Christ and his coming again at the end of time, or even at the end of our own lives. The story of Christ's coming is "already" and "not yet." It's like Christmas cookies - you know they are there because you can smell them baking, but you have not yet eaten one.

Today's Gospel passage describes the consequences of the birth of Christ into our history. Jesus says, "The blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them."

As I read this Gospel, I was struck that John the Baptist heard about Jesus while he was in prison. It reminded me of how Nelson Mandela heard and acted on the teaching of Jesus while he was in prison. I hear the story of the Touch of the Master's Hand today on three levels.

First of all, I hear Jesus' words to John's disciple as an examination of conscience. They ask me to look at how I *need* the touch of the Master's hand.

How am I **blind** to my own faults - and to the gifts God has given me, since every sin is the misuse of a gift given by God to do good? How am I blind to my own goodness - to the foundational truth that God loves me? How am I like our friend **Ami the Toad**, -[a child holds up a toad puppet]. Ami has "warts"? Do I need to hear the good news the way Ami hears it? *"God loves you, warts and all!"*

How have I been **deaf** to the needs of others, in my own family and community and in the world which has become so small. How have I been deaf to the call to peace, justice and non-violence that comes from Isaiah, James, and Jesus?

How have I been like a **leper** - in need of forgiveness because I have distanced myself from God and others by sin. How am I like the people I exclude or reject, perhaps because they are too much like what I reject or hate in myself? How have I been deaf to the clear call to receive the forgiveness of Jesus, and to forgive as I have been forgiven? This is another part of the good news that our friend, **Sam the Skunk**, has heard [a child holds up a skunk puppet]. Sam & all of us need to hear this truth over and over again, *"Jesus forgives you, even when your sins stink!"*

How am I **dead**? Maybe not in the grave, but stuck: in an old resentment, a comfortable but destructive habit, a consuming addiction or even a stage of my life that is over and I don't want to let go of.

As I listened to the story of Nelson Mandela this past week, I saw an example of someone who was, in a way, raised from the dead & refused to stay in the living death of hatred, bitterness and unforgiveness. He once said, *"Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."* Those are words that make logical sense, but are almost impossible to live .

I would say that it is *always* impossible to forgive without the grace of Christ. When someone comes to me and tells me a painful story of how deeply they have been hurt, betrayed or abused and say that they cannot forgive, even though they know they should, what I say first is: "You're right, you can't forgive - don't even try to do it on your own."

Then I ask, "Do you believe that Jesus can forgive? Remember the words he spoke from the cross, 'Father, forgive them ...' Even Jesus did not try to forgive on his own when he was the one being tortured & killed. What we can do is to pray, "I can't, Jesus can, I think I'll let him" or, even better, "I can't, you can, I will let you."

On a second level, when I hear the story about the old violin, I hear a call to look for the ways Jesus heals and forgives, and to rejoice, just like the crowd does when it sees the Master change the violin from a worthless piece of junk into a priceless instrument.

Last week I saw and heard story after story about how Nelson Mandela was touched by the master, of how he rose above the pain & torture like an **eagle** [Anna flies Eddie the Eagle] & how through his life, a whole nation was transformed - and the whole world was affected.

On a 3<sup>rd</sup> level, the Gospel & the story ask you and I: how am I called to be a violinist in God's orchestra, or a singer in the Messiah's choir. How are we called to be like John the Baptist, how are we called to prepare the way of the Lord. How are we called to be like Jesus by proclaiming the Good News of Peace to the poor? How are we called to be ministers of reconciliation like Nelson Mandela in our own families, parishes and communities. It is a simple question but a difficult one, since the need for peace and justice seems too big for any one of us to fix. Still, I believe the Spirit of God asks us:

What can you do to contribute to justice and peace in the world and the Church?

One of the things you can do for yourself and for the people you love is to participate in one of the celebrations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the area this Advent.

To celebrate reconciliation *together* is a way of experiencing the touch of the Master's hand not only as broken individuals, but as a pilgrim people of God, in need of healing as a community, because we are living in the time between the first and second coming of Christ.

It is a way to witness the Church healing the wound of isolation and challenging the individualism of our culture: An individualism that gets so extreme that it can justify abortion for the sake of personal comfort, violence for the sake of revenge & even war for corporate profit. It can challenge the addiction to possessions that this season sometimes seems to encourage and remove the blindness to how our excessive consumption can deprive others of food, clean water and a place to live in peace.

To celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation individually or as a community gives us a chance to live the call of the Gospel: The call to *become* good news to the poor, to publicly act out our *faith* that we are forgiven, our *hope* that we can live in peace and our *trust* that we are not alone and can change the world by playing our part in God's orchestra, by adding our voice to the Messiah's chorus. Because I believe that the grace of the sacrament can do miracles, I will be available after this Mass today, and after all the Masses - including the 11 AM, to hear confessions and celebrate reconciliation.

This Eucharist is another opportunity to let Jesus touch each of us and to recall the story of how he showed us how to love, forgive and bring peace. In a few moments we will pray in the spirit of an ancient Advent song:

♪ O come, Desire of nations, bind ~ In one the hearts of all humankind;  
Bid thou our sad divisions cease, ~ And be thyself our Prince of Peace.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! O Israel, to thee shall come Emmanuel! ♪

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#### Prayer of the faithful - conclusion

Lord, give us the joy that is not the absence of sorrow but the presence of God.  
May we experience the touch of the master's hand in our celebration of this Eucharist.  
May we reflect the good news we have heard and become what we receive in Communion.

Communion Meditation - I woke up singing this song, and wondered what the Spirit wanted me to do with it, since I had decided not to use it for the homily. It sets some of the words of the reading from Isaiah today to music, so I want to play it and sing it for you as a communion meditation, in the hope that it will become an "earworm" for you too, singing itself in your memory.

♪ The eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf shall hear.  
The chains of the lame will be broken, streams will flow in deserts of fear.  
Your kingdom come, your will be done, now that we have become your own.  
Let the prayer of our hearts daily be: God, make us your family.

God, make us your family. ♪