

Morning Worship Services

Sunday, February 23, 2003

“The Greatest Song Ever Written”

2 Timothy 1:3-12 (especially verse 12)

Dean K. Wilson

Birthdays are wonderful events, aren't they? Just out of curiosity, how many of you have a birthday in February? Would you raise your hands if you have a birthday in February? Thank you. That's great. Happy birthday!

I was born back in 1947. For those of you who have good math skills you have already calculated that on the date of my last birthday, back in August, I became 55 years old. You may be interested to know that Steve Skinner and I share the same birth day, although I am quite a few years older than he.

In fact, we had a joint Skinner-Wilson family celebration last August. We all drove over to a suburb of Cleveland to eat dinner at Ruth's Chris Steakhouse.

Wow, what a night. I can hardly wait until August rolls around and we can do it again.

I spent my teenage years in the early 1960's. This was the heyday of Youth for Christ International. We had citywide Youth for Christ rallies every other Saturday night. We had lots of interesting and challenging speakers like Marlin "Butch" Hardman from Washington, DC, or Dave Breese from Chicago.

A very big part of those Youth for Christ days was Christian humor. That's right. Christian humor. We all enjoyed books that taught deep spiritual truths, but used humor as the primary vehicle. Books like Jess Moody's *Don't Miss It If You Can*¹, or Joe Bayly's *The Gospel Blimp*². I was always particularly fond of *The Gospel Blimp*.

Joe Bayly tells the story of a man who was so consumed with the idea of evangelizing his city for the cause of Jesus Christ, that he purchased a large dirigible, loaded it with a powerful public address system, and spent his weekends flying over the city, playing Christian music, and dropping gospel tracts from his perch up in the sky.

The problem with his approach was that he was so consumed with his gospel blimp that he never took the time to become friends with his next door neighbor. As a result, he was spending time trying to evangelize the city and forgetting about the person who was literally within arm's reach. Joe Bayly's book, *The Gospel Blimp*, probably did more to further the cause of friendship evangelism than almost any other publication of that day.

Another very popular book of Christian humor in those days of the mid-1960's was written by a United Methodist minister, Charles Merrill Smith. The book was titled *How To Become A Bishop Without Being Religious*³. In the book, Charles Merrill Smith pokes fun at what he felt were a number of distracting foibles of the Christian church of that day. Among his barbs was a section of the book subtitled, "The Greatest Hymn Ever Written." Smith bestowed that honor on the gospel song, *In the Garden*.

As I read Smith's book, laughing most of the way, my laughter came to an abrupt halt when I started this particular chapter. Why? Well the simple reason was that the gospel song, *In the Garden*⁴, was one of my mother's very favorite songs.

I come to the Garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses.
And, the voice I hear falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

I'd stay in the garden with Him
Though the night around me be falling.
But He bids me go; through the voice of woe,
His voice to me is calling.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing,
And the melody that He gave to me,
Within my heart is ringing.

And, He walks with me, and, He talks with me
And, He tells me I am His own.
And, the joy we share as we tarry there.
None other has ever known.

Charles Merrill Smith thought that the overwrought sentimentality of the lyrics, coupled with a truly schmaltzy tune, was just a bit over the line. And, while I will not attempt to defend either the poetry or the musicality of the piece, I am going to stand firm on my conviction that the concept of meeting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane would be a life-changing experience—even for Charles Merrill Smith.

So what is the "Greatest Song Ever Written?" I think the text that I read for you a few moments ago holds a key to answering that question.

In the Second Epistle to Timothy, the Apostle Paul is writing fondly to his son in the faith. I believe that Paul is very much aware that his time on this earth is drawing to a close. Because of this, he wants to share some parting thoughts with someone that he believes will remain to carry on the mission of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ.

I think, too, that Paul has a strong sense that he is standing at the brink of an exciting time in the history of the Christian church. It will be a time when some truly wonderful and dynamic events are about to unfold. It will be a time when God will visit the believers with mighty power, a power that will have life-changing consequences.

Notice again what Paul writes to Timothy:

⁷For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

⁸So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, ⁹who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, ¹⁰but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

¹¹And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. ¹²That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.

Paul's declaration at the close of this powerful passage sounds forth like the blast of a trumpet: "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day." The certainty that resides in Paul's heart has an electric quality to it. It fairly crackles with energy. And, I believe this declaration springs forth from a "song" that resides in the very depths of Paul's heart. It is a "song" that has been placed there by Jesus, Himself.

"Well that may all be fine and good for Paul," you may say. "After all, he was an apostle. But, what about ordinary, everyday kind of people?"

Okay. Fair question.

Let me introduce you to a very ordinary, everyday kind of guy. His name is Jeremiah C. Lamphere.

It is the fall of the year 1857. The place is lower Manhattan in New York City. The Old Dutch North Church had fallen on tough times. Membership had diminished to the point that the trustees were considering closing once and for all. In sort of a last ditch effort to bring new life into the church, the trustees hired 49 year-old Jeremiah C. Lamphere, a former merchant, to begin an aggressive program of visitation. They scraped together a few dollars less than \$1,000 for his annual salary.

Every day for three months, Jeremiah would begin his day with a protracted period of prayer on his knees, pouring his heart out before the Lord. Each day, arising from his prayer time with a renewed sense of purpose, he would begin his rounds of visitation. Knocking on doors, he would enquire about people's spiritual needs and invite them to the Old Dutch North Church.

At doorway after doorway, Jeremiah found a genuine lack of spiritual interest. People did not really seem to be drawn to the claims of Christ. Nor did they seem to have any interest in attending church services. At the end of each day, Jeremiah would often return to his room filled with discouragement. However, as each new day dawned, buoyed up by his time of prayer, he would vigorously step out into the city and begin again to knock on doors.

One day, God placed the notion into Jeremiah's mind that perhaps businessmen might find it enjoyable to take a short break in the middle of the day and gather for prayer. With the permission of the trustees in hand, Jeremiah set out with handbills and a sign inviting businessmen to gather at Noon in a rented hall on Fulton Street for prayer.

The first Wednesday, September 23, 1857, Jeremiah sat all alone in the room until half past twelve. Then he heard some footsteps on the stairs. Two men arrived and then two more. A few minutes later, another man joined them. Six in all.

The time of prayer was quite unremarkable, but the men agreed to meet the following Wednesday. At the appointed hour, twenty men showed up to pray. In this meeting, the hearts of the men were strangely warmed as they began to pour out their petitions to the Lord, asking Him to move in a mighty way throughout the City of New York. When their prayer time ended, the men again agreed to meet the following week.

On the third Wednesday, forty men showed up to pray. Some cried out to God asking for a great outpouring of His Holy Spirit on the City. Others asked for a sweeping revival fire, like the one that had swept through the colonies a hundred years before. As the prayer time came to a close, the men asked Jeremiah if they could meet the next day, rather than wait an entire week. And so, the daily prayer meetings began.

Day by day the numbers at the prayer meeting increased. Within a few weeks, over 3,000 people were gathering every day for prayer. Soon the rented space filled to overflowing and other prayer meetings began at other nearby locations. Within six months, over 10,000 people were gathering in over 20 different daily prayer meetings. And the Great Lay Prayer Revival of 1857 and 1858 had begun.

The Revival Fire spread to Philadelphia, to Baltimore, and to Boston. Traveling businessmen carried the idea to Washington, DC, to Chicago and to Louisville. Before long, prayer meetings had spread from the large cities to smaller towns. As a result, a great sweeping movement of God sailed from one coast of the United States to the other.

All of this occurred just a few months before the shots were fired that started one of the greatest tragedies in the history of our nation, the Civil War. There is no question that God intended to lift the spiritual fiber of the citizens of this country to a new level that would sustain them through that dark time.

Numerous accounts written by people of that day testify to the fact that as they met for prayer, they began to experience an overwhelming sense of the Presence of Christ in their lives. Paul's words to Timothy became a watchword: "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."

Well what about us in 21st Century Erie, Pennsylvania?

With all of my heart I believe that we are standing at the brink of a period of enormous spiritual challenge. All around us our great nation has sunk into a time of great spiritual despair. The crises of the economy and war have heaped another layer of discouragement on a downward spiraling mountain of spiritual decline.

And yet, has God not prepared us for just such a time as this? Has God not gathered together in this congregation a people with talents and abilities that God can use to minister to the needs of Erie, Pennsylvania in a powerful way? Has God not gathered together in this place people who long to express Christ's love to one another and to those in our neighborhood and in the larger community? Has God not given us a renewed thirst for His Word? Has God not given us a longing for another great outpouring of His mercy? Has God not given us a longing for an overwhelming sense of His Presence in our midst?

I believe He has done all of these things. The final question, of course, remains: "How do we respond?"

Matthew Henry, the great Presbyterian church leader of the 18th Century once wrote, "When God intends great mercy for His people, the first thing He does is set them a-praying."

So here's what I suggest we do, you and I. I suggest we make a decision this very day to begin to pray. I am suggesting that we make a decision today to pray as individuals and as groups of people. I am suggesting that we pray very specifically for three critical things.

First of all, I am suggesting that we agree to pray for our Pastor, Steven Marsh, and for his family. I believe we need to agree together to pray for protection, for safety, for wisdom, for energy, for time to study, and for a strong sense of Christ's Presence in his life.

Secondly, I am suggesting that we agree to pray for our elders, deacons, trustees, and the other members of our church staff. Again, I believe we need to pray for these leaders that God has raised up in our midst, and for their families. We need to ask God to protect them, to give them wisdom, knowledge, energy, a thirst for His Word, and a strong sense of Christ's Presence in their lives.

Thirdly, I am suggesting that we agree to pray for each other. I am suggesting that right now you look around you and pick out someone sitting near you. I am suggesting that you agree to pray for that person every day for the next week. I am suggesting that you pray for protection, for safety, for energy, for an increased devotion to Christ, and for a strong sense of Christ's Presence in that person's life. And when you come here next week, I am suggesting that you pick out another person and pray for that one all week long. And the week after that, another person. And the week after that, another person.

You see, I believe with all my heart that the "Greatest Song Ever Written" is the Presence of Christ in the heart of a believer. It is Christ's very Presence that gives us the ability to do everything God wants us to do for the sake of His Kingdom. It is Christ's very Presence in your heart and in my heart that will let us proclaim with the Apostle Paul, "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day."

In a sentence what I have been trying to share with you today might go something like this: "An overwhelming sense of Christ's Presence is that revival characteristic most prized by God's people." Let me say that again. "An overwhelming sense of Christ's Presence is that revival characteristic most prized by God's people."

Back in 1921, Anna B. Russell penned these words⁵ :

There is never a day so dreary,
There is never a night so long,
But the soul that is trusting Jesus
Will somewhere find a song.

There is never a cross so heavy,
There is never a weight of woe,
But that Jesus will help to carry
Because He loveth thee so.

There is never a care or a burden,
There is never a grief or loss,
But that Jesus in love will lighten
When carried to the cross.

There is never a guilty sinner,
There is never a wand'ring one,
But that God can in mercy pardon
Thro' Jesus Christ, His Son.

Wonderful, wonderful Jesus,
In the heart He implanteth a song;
A song of deliverance, of courage, of strength,
In the heart He implanteth a song.

Let's bow in a word of prayer.

¹ Moody, Jess. *Don't Miss It If You Can*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1965.

² Bayly, Joseph. *The Gospel Blimp*. Glen Ellyn, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1960.

³ Smith, Charles Merrill. *How To Become A Bishop Without Being Religious*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1966.

⁴ Miles, C. Austin. *In the Garden*. The Rodeheaver Co., 1912, 1940.

⁵ Russell, Anna B. *Wonderful, Wonderful Jesus*. Music by Ernest O. Sellers. Broadman Press, 1921, 1949.