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A Season of Stewardship “Take My Life and Let it Be.....” I. Time, Hands, and Feet

Isaiah 52:7 (NIV) 7How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

Romans 10:14 (NIV) 14How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

If you are of a certain age, when you hear the haunting strains of the song “*Imagine*” **[Carol/Kim plays the first few measures]** you probably can’t help singing along with John Lennon’s plaintive voice: “*Imagine there’s no heaven; it’s easy if you try. No hell below us; above us only sky.*”¹ Now, John Lennon wrote this song out of a deep disappointment with religion. That shows a few lines later in the song where he writes “*Nothing to kill or die for. And no religion too.*” And none of us who are honest can deny the fact that too often in too many places in too many times among every religion of the world, Christianity included, religion has indeed been used to both foment and justify hatred, persecution and even murder of those who are different. And that is a legacy that we can only overcome when we confess to it and resolve to never let our faith be a rationalization for hate or bigotry.

But there is another sense in which Lennon’s line is not accurate, or at least not nuanced enough. Why? Well, to use the question of his song’s title, let us indeed imagine this morning what our lives would be like if the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ did not exist, let us imagine what our lives would be like if there were and never had been this or any church. This morning as we begin our “Season of Stewardship”

¹<http://www.lyrics007.com/John%20Lennon%20Lyrics/Imagine%20Lyrics.html>

culminating two Sundays from now in our opportunity to make our financial and prayer commitments to our congregation's mission in 2013, our theme comes from the wonderful old hymn *"Take My Life and Let It Be."* Now, you'll notice in our hymnals that the editors have, in that two-thousand-year-old tradition of rewriting hymns, changed the title to simply *"Take My Life."* And that's because that phrase *"let it be"* is too easily heard in our 21st century ears as "leave me alone" or in that wonderfully pithy word born in Yiddish and re-created by Homer Simpson: *"Meh."* But on these three Sundays we are going to take a different tack and use the hymn's old title but use it to ask the question "Take my life and let it be.... **WHAT?!?"** The first two verses of that hymn focus on our time, our hands, our feet and so today, as we begin this time of reflection, let us indeed imagine what our hands, our feet, and our time would be like if there were no gospel, if there had been and was no church. How would will fill our days? Where would we go? What would our hands cling to? What would our lives be like? ***Imagine, imagine.... [Carol/Kim plays a few bars of "Imagine"]***

"Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise." So begins the first verse of the hymn. But imagine there were no good news of the gospel; imagine there were no church.... You might well find yourself, much too often, standing at the grave-side of a friend, or a parent, or – most awfully – a child, with an unutterable sadness at the finality of that parting having only the realization, as one poet put it, *"Here lies another box for nature...Life is only chemistry – Our stay is only brief."*² You might find yourself then on Sunday morning afterwards at Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts and the coffee seems as bitter and hard to swallow as your emotions. Your feet would not take you to church where you could be gathered into the embrace of those whose beautiful lives, beautiful feet, as the prophet Isaiah put it, remind you with gentleness

²"Disingenuousness," by Mark R. Slaughter <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/disingenuousness/>

and sure but quiet certainty that God reigns, that even in the midst of earthly death there are the good tidings of life everlasting. No, your feet would not take you there, and you would not hear those things because there is no God and there is no church. Your moments and your days, in the words of the hymn, would not be flowing with “ceaseless praise” but instead with the reality, as, Paul McCartney put it in one of his saddest songs, that *“it’s just another day, it’s just another day.”*³ ***Imagine, imagine.*** .

[Carol/Kim plays a few bars of “Imagine”]

“Take my moments and my days....” Or maybe its not death that is your companion in this imagined life where there is no good news of the gospel, no church, but simply one of those occasions when you are deeply puzzled or at your wit’s end about how to deal with something or depressed and dispirited by the turn a relationship has taken and you don’t know what to do. Or maybe you do know what to do and you it’s courage you lack. Or maybe there just are no good options. In this imagined life with no church, no gospel, you can’t do what writer Ann Lamott described a few years ago about why she made her then-teenage son attend worship even though he was going through a stage when he didn’t want to do so. *“The main reason is to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by.... I believe he will almost certainly [want to] come back [to worship],”* she says, *“because life will do what life does, which is to become incredibly hard and confusing. There will be losses he barely survives. And at some point someone will say, ‘Do you want to come to this funny little church I’ve found?’”*⁴ No, no they wont. For while life is indeed sometimes hard and confusing and the losses hurt, there is no worship for him or you to come back

³<http://www.lyricsdepot.com/paul-mccartney/another-day.html>

⁴“An Interview With Anne Lamott,”
http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/125/anne-lamott

to, no company of people who have traveled this road before and survived it because of their faith in those good tidings spoken by Isaiah, no wisdom of two-millennia of tradition to draw on to understand your life in the sight of God, no – in the words, again, of Anne Lamott –

God who is with us always... a God who does not roll His or Her eyes at us ... who does not forsake us, even when we whine, or are bad to each other. [A]

*God who loves me, chooses me, forgives me, every step of the amazing way.*⁵

No, no, none of that for your moments and your days have no gospel, no church.

***Imagine, imagine.* . [Carol/Kim plays a few bars of “Imagine”]**

“Take my hands, and let them move/at the impulse of thy love.” And, to continue our thought-experiment, what might your *hands* be doing in a world where there was no good news of the gospel, no church? I suspect that your hands would be clinging tightly and determinedly to what you have, fearful that someone might take it from you. I suspect your arms would encircle only those who look like you, think like you, even hate the same things you hate. I suspect your hands would more often than not be firmly clasped around the gate of your life that is firmly shut against those who are of a different culture, a different orientation, a different economic class. For you would not have the example of Jesus who had always challenged you to widen your imagination because He kept on reminding you that who your neighbor is is always a bigger notion than you think. You would not have the witness of Paul who, when you were tempted to huddle up with your own kind, fists clenched against those who you feared might be threatening, reminded you that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female” nor any of those other distinctions that when made ultimate so divide humankind into warring, slogan-slinging, fear-fomenting factions. When reading poet

⁵ibid.

Edwin Markham's lines "*They drew a line that shut me out,...But love and I had the wit to win. We drew a circle and brought them in*"⁶ you would likely be applauding not the triumph of love but the shrewdness of that "they" who know it's prudent to shut out other folks because they might threaten you. You might well find yourself nodding in agreement with one philosopher's characterization of life as "solitary,... nasty, brutish, and short."⁷ ***Imagine, imagine.... [Carol/Kim plays a few bars of "Imagine"]***

It **IS** a depressing thought-experiment, isn't it? But fortunately, it is only that – an imagining of what our lives would be like if there were no gospel, if there were no church. But there is, there is, and so we *do* have those wonderful words of life that have formed us and shaped us: Words like Paul's very definition of the good news when he says that there is nothing in all creation – nothing! – that shall ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38). Words like Jesus' comforting "*All those who are weak and heavy-laden I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). Words like "*When you did it unto the least of these, you did it unto Me*" (Matthew 25:40) which remind us that we are called to care for all God's children because we are not alone in this world. How do those words make you feel? What is your reaction to the realization that that thought experiment was just a sad and scary fantasy? I don't know about you, but my reaction is one of sheer gratitude.

In Anne Lamott's latest book she has some wonderful and oh-so-true lines that I think capture our reaction to the realization that that imagined thought experiment is indeed **not** true, our sheer awe in response to a universe where there is a God who cares. Hear her words:

When we are stunned to the place beyond words... When all we can say in

⁶http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/179023.Edwin_Markham

⁷From Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, 1651. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leviathan_%28book%29

*response is "Wow," that's a prayer.... [and then] Saying and meaning "Thanks" leads to a crazy thought: What more can I give?*⁸

But it's not so crazy, is it? Gratitude begets gratitude. And what should you do about that in this season of stewardship or on any day? What should your own "Wow" in the face of a God of gentleness and goodness and justice lead you to? Well, let me make a suggestion: I hope that one of the things that it leads you to is for her question to indeed become **your** question: "*What more can I give?*" I hope that you join me in wondering how you can respond to that sense of gratitude with an increased gratitude of your own. But before you answer, let me say something that is sure to give our Finance Committee fits: do NOT give to the church, do NOT make your financial commitments for 2013, because the church needs your money. Don't do it!

Why? Well, because, in the end, that's not the most important reason for you to give, that's not the most important reason for your to express your own response to Lamott's question "*What more can I give?*" No, the reason for you and I to give is because we DO live in a world that is fueled by God's unending love and God's expectation of justice, we ARE held in this life and the next by tender mercies that find us new every morning, we are given, as my wife Barbara so eloquently and succinctly puts it, a promise and a purpose that makes each day not "*just another day*" but an opportunity to love and be loved and to make a difference for things that matter.

[Carol/Kim begins playing hymn softly under me] The most important reason to give is because that song, "*Imagine there's no heaven... and no religion too,*" is NOT in fact the song that we must sadly sing but instead can lift our voices in glorious harmony and belt out an oh-so-different song: "*Take our moments and our days, let them flow in ceaseless praise, let them flow in ceaseless praise.*" Will you do so with me? Hymn number 609, the first two verses.

⁸Anne Lamott, [Help. Thanks. Wow.](http://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott) Forthcoming. Quoted from www.facebook.com/AnneLamott