Joys and Sorrows; Stories and Songs:  
A Cello Sermon  
H. Stephen Shoemaker  
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**Play “It is Well With My Soul”**

I Joy and Sorrows; Stories and Songs

The first time I did this—preaching and playing together was in the spring of 1990. I was the pastor of the church right next to the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. We had gone through a terrible week with the Board of Trustees there as the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC had led to the takeover of the trustees. It would lead to upheaval in the lives of faculty, students and administration, a good number of whom were in the church.

Moreover, one of my close friends had died, and another was dying with a brain tumor. An avalanche of grief had hit my soul, and I was more depressed than I knew.

That week I found myself awakening early each morning. Unable to write, study and pray as before, I would get up, sit behind the cello and play, play out my griefs and fears, my anxiety and my faith, up from the soul, out through the fingers, into the air. What came to me those hours were songs, most hymn tunes, and stories, from scripture and life.

So when Sunday came, I gave to the church what God had given to me. So today I offer you a new version of this sermon. Joys and Sorrows: Stories and Songs.

**Play “It is Well” again, and ask the congregation to sing along with the refrain.**

II When Words Aren’t Enough

I remember him clearly. I was a student in New York City. He was a short man with an enormous face, the face of an Old Testament prophet. His name was Abraham Heschel, and he taught at Jewish Theological Seminary right across the street from Union Seminary where I was a student. I used to watch him walk down the street to class, this man with the huge head of silver hair whose words were so stirring to me. I heard him speak at the memorial service at Riverside Church for his good friend, Reinhold Niebuhr. Here are some words that he spoke in one of his books to me:

In no other act does one experience so often the disparity between the *desire* for expression and the *means* for expression as in prayer. The inadequacy of the means at our disposal appear so tangible, so tragic, that one feels it a grace to be able to give one’s self up to music, to a tone, to a song, to a chant. The wave of a song carries the soul to heights which utterable meanings can never reach. Such an abandonment is no escape…for the world of unutterable meanings is the nursery of the soul, the cradle of all our ideas. It is not an escape but a return to one’s origins.”

I found myself giving myself up to a tone, to a song through the cello. God’s spirit ministering to me as I played.

**Play Come Ye, Disconsolate**

Come ye, disconsolate, where’er ye languish  
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel;  
here bring your wounded hearts, here tell you anguish.  
Earth hath no sorrow that heaven cannot heal

III Woody Allen and Vocation

One of my favorite scenes from a movie is in Woody Allen’s first movie, Take the Money and Run.

Woody Allen, the main character, is recounting his youth and remembers playing the cello in the marching band! He would run ahead of the band, chair in one hand, cello in the other. About the time he’d get the chair down, his cello between his legs to start to play, they would catch up. He’d jump up and run ahead again.

I had great sympathy with that scene. In my day growing up as a young boy in North Carolina, if you played the cello, you didn’t quite fit. The cool guys, if they played an instrument, played the trumpet. Then they could play in the dance bands. They would be up on the stage in their baby blue dinner jackets blowing their shiny trumpets, and there I was on the edge of the dance floor with the word Baptist illuminated across my anxious face like a blinking neon sign.

I remember the day my parents took me and my twin sister, Susan, to the music store to pick out the instrument that we were to play the next year in the 5th grade beginning orchestra. We were nine years old.

I remember the smell of the music shop: a mixture of oil and resin, wood and brass polish, and old sheet music. I honked on the clarinet for a few minutes. I blew into the trumpet. I tried out a violin, and then sat down with a half-size cello between my legs and scratched out a few notes. It sounded pretty bleak, but I knew then and there that even though the trumpet was more popular and might make *me* more popular, that whatever human feeling I would ever have, joy or sorrow, I could say it with a cello.

Maybe the cello chose me, or God chose for me the cello, because it fit most of what my soul needed to say. Later God would give me another instrument to sayeven what the cello couldn’t say, and that was the instrument of preaching.

Somebody asked me once how my early training as a cellist prepared me or helped me in my preparation as a preacher. At first I thought *discipline.* It taught me discipline. Hard work is required for any worthy thing, and music teaches you the necessity of hard work.

Then I though *poise*, that’s what it taught me. It taught me how to get up in front of people and perform without falling apart—or throwing up.

But the real and most crucial way that the training helped me was this: it taught me the joyful freedom of being a servant of the manuscript. The music showed you when to be soft, when to be loud, when to play like a march, and when to play like a lullaby.

So preaching for me is being the servant of the manuscript of scripture. The markings are all there just like the markings in a musical score. It tells me when to shout and when to whisper, when to weep and when to laugh, when to challenge and when to comfort.

There’s no more wonderful freedom in the world for me than this: when I am serving the text. And that can also be said of all for our lives. As Augustine said: “In Thy service, O God, is perfect freedom.”

**Play All Creatures of Our God and King**

IV David:

Now the story of King David. How Israel loved him, he this fascination combination of musician and warrior, leader and poet. Maybe it was because of this phrase used to describe him: he had   
“a heart after God’s own heart.” For all his prodigious capacities for both good and bad, this is what saved him.

The story of David teaches us that all of us have the capacity for good and for evil, and as the capacities for good increase so also increase the capacities for evil.

So for example: a speaker. The more gifted a speaker in communicating the truth, the more gifted that speaker is also in concealing the truth, even from himself or herself. That is why sometimes the smarter we get, the more we outsmart ourselves. But what saves us is what saved David: to have a heart after God’s own heart.

When he was a young man he wrote *Psalm 18.* It starts like this:

I am in love with you, Yahweh.

The word “in love” there in the Hebrew is *rachem,* and it is the word for womb. It’s heart love, womb love. So, Old Testament scholar Samuel Terrien translated that first verse of *Psalm 18* this way:

I am in love with you, Yahweh.

Can you imagine that young warrior saying words like that? Can you imagine John Wayne saying words like that?

I am in love with thee, Yahweh,  
 my strength

Yahweh my rock, my fortress, my rescuer.

For it is thou, O Yahweh, who gives light   
 to my lamp

Thou, O my God, who illumines my darkness.

For by thee I can out run an armed band  
 and by thee, by my God,  
 I can leap over a wall.

The young David feeling his oats and God’s oats too.

**Play A Mighty Fortress**

**Play first line of Bach Suite I, Prelude**

V Pablo Casals

Pablo Casals was one of the world’s greatest cellists. He was also one of the world’s greatest citizens. He wrote his autobiography when he was ninety-three years old. Imagine that. *Joys and Sorrows*, it was called.

His beloved homeland was Spain. When the Spanish Republic of 1931 was shattered in the Spanish civil war, Casals fought the Fascist uprising with the best of his weapons: his cello, his baton, and his words. His defense of freedom forced his exile. So he fled to France in 1939 and never again returned to Spain. The rest of his life was spent in exile.

A few glimpses of his life.

He spoke of his daily routine in these words:

For the past eighty years I have started each day in the same manner. It is not a mechanical routine but something essential to my daily life. I go to the piano and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is sort of a benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being part. It fills me with an awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day it is something new, fantastic and unbelievable. That is Bach, like nature, a miracle.1

When he was a young boy, he would take piano lessons and study piano improvisations. When he indulged himself in some intricate harmony, his teacher would wrap his arms around his shoulders and say, “Pablito, in the language of everybody-Yes?”2

In the language of everybody, yes! That’s what the Incarnation of Jesus Christ was about, God speaking into our lives with God’s own life, in the language of everybody.

Once he was visiting San Francisco. He was climbing a nearby mountain when suddenly a boulder broke loose from the heights above him and was hurling down towards him. He dodged. It missed his head, but it smashed his left hand, his fingering hand. His friends were horrified, but Casals wrote,

…when I looked at my mangled bloody fingers, I had a strangely different reaction. My first thought was, “Thank God I’ll never have to play the cello again.”3

His hand, thank God, was restored, but his first reaction gives us an honest thing to ponder. Any gift from God carries with it heavy responsibility, responsibility we had just as soon pass up somedays. For Casals dedication to his gift involved in his words “a sort of enslavement”. And there was always for him, again in his words, his “dreadful anxiety” before a performance. But it was his wonderous gift to others.

We’re all tempted to give up the best gifts we can offer to the world because of what they demand of us. Sometimes despair tempts us from doing our best, or what we best can do. Sometimes cynicism works its way into us. Sometimes fear of failure or failure itself. Sometimes rejection by others. Sometimes just plain fatigue can do it. But don’t give up. Don’t ever give up. Don’t give up the best gifts that you have been given to offer the world because of the heaviness of its burden.

You are what you alone can best offer the world. To give that up is to give up a part of your selfhood.

One more incident.

He was hurrying from the train to Paris to perform. He went directly to the concert hall to practice the Dvorak cello concert under the conducting of Gabriel Pierne.

Shortly before the rehearsal Pierne showed up in his dressing room to discuss the score. At some point the conductor tossed the music down and said, “What a ghastly piece of music!”

Casals thought at first he was joking. But Pierne when on to say, “It’s hardly worth playing. It’s not really music at all.” Casals stared at him uncomprehendingly. “How can you talk that way”, he said, “about such a magnificent work?” And then he added, “If that’s the way you feel about the work, then you’re clearly not capable of conducting it. Since I happen to love the music, I couldn’t take part in its desecration. And I won’t. I refuse to play.”4 And he refused to go on stage. The conductor had to go on to the stage and announce Casals’ refusal to play. Later Casals was sued and fined 3,000 *francs*, no small fee at that time. But Casals said,

…I would act the same way today. Either you believe in what you are doing or you do not. Music is something to be approached with integrity, not something to be turned on or off like tap water.5

And if true for music, how much more for our faith.

**Play Bach Suite I, Menuet II**

VI Three Boys

One more story. It is about three boys, could have been three girls: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They had been taken into captivity in Babylon like many other promising Hebrew young people of that time.

King Nebuchadnezzar had had a golden statue made and ordered everyone to bow down to it. If they did not bow down to it, they would be thrown into the burning fiery furnace.

The three young Jews refused. The King hauled them into his presence and reiterated his command.

“If you do not bow, you will burn.”

The three young men responded with these utterly remarkable words:

If our God whom we serve is able to save us from the burning fiery furnace and from your power, O King, he will save us, *but if not*, be it known, O King, we will not serve your gods or worship the image you have set up.

**But if not.** Those are three of the most courageous words I have ever heard. Faith never acts on clear sight of the future but only on clear sense of conscience. God did protect then in the fiery furnace. Thanks be to God. But their faith to act no matter the outcome has inspired many a person who have suffered for their faith: Joan of Arc, John Bunyan, Anne Hutchinson, Martin Luther King Jr., Clarence Jordan, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Fanny Lou Hamer.

The prophet from the Exile said,

Fear not, for I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you  
 and through the waters they shall   
 not overwhelm you;

When you pass through fire, you shall  
 not be burned  
 and the flame shall not consume you,

For I am the Lord your God,  
 the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

If our God can deliver us, we will be delivered. But if not, yet shall we believe—and stand firm!

**Play How Firm a Foundation**  
Then invite the congregation to finish the sermon by singing “How Firm a Foundation”, all verses

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1. Pablo Casals, *Joys and Sorrows*: His Own Story as Told to Albert E. Kahn (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1970) p.17.

2. Ibid., p.60.

3. Ibid., p. 105.

4. Ibid., p. 135.

5. Ibid., p. 136.