

The Sound of a Bell Not Ringing

A Sermon by David Barker

December 25, 2011

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-20

When I finished my doctorate, my first faculty position was at TCU in Ft. Worth

--I cannot now remember why but one day, in one of my classes, the students were asking me if I had a dream...something that, secretly, I'd always wanted to do but never had

--I *did* have a dream, but other than with Terry I'd never shared it with anyone because I was afraid they'd think it was silly

--I debated whether or not to say anything about it to my students

--I started to say, "no, not really" but then, for some reason, the words just came out of my mouth: "I've always wanted to conduct a symphony orchestra"

--I waited for them to snicker...but they didn't...no one laughed at my dream, no one groaned in embarrassment

--class just went on and, frankly, I forgot about it

--then, two days later, when the class met again, I walked into the room and noticed my students, all 50 or so of them, were strangely quiet

--normally, they were flapping their yaps until I started to lecture

--I walked to the front of the room and took out my lecture notes, and there, on the lectern, tied with a gold ribbon, was a baton

--I just stood there, I don't know how long, so moved I was doing everything I could not to cry

--I picked up the baton...the first time in my life I'd ever held a real baton...and every student in the room applauded

That was nearly 30 years ago...I've yet to conduct a symphony orchestra...

--probably, I will *never* conduct a symphony orchestra because I don't know the first thing about conducting...about giving even a downbeat

--I cannot read music, not one note...and I can't play any musical instrument except in my fantasies...

--but I've never forgotten the gift of that baton...never forgotten the feeling I felt that moment I first saw it, first picked it up and held it

--what I felt, I think, in its way, was love...an affirmation that my dream was, after all, not silly but good

--and because dreams not lived are really pieces of us, it was an affirmation of *me*...

--it was a moment that touched my life then and, I'm confident, has shaped it since...thanks to the gift of a baton, I've been less inclined to think other dreams might be silly

It seems to me that such are the moments that *do* shape our lives, not that they are the only ones

--we can be equally shaped by moments that hurt and cut...but, ultimately, especially if we let them, it is the moments when we experience love that we are, in fact, most human, most alive
--and, I suspect, when we come to look back on our lives, it is those moments we will most remember

This day of all days, it's important to be mindful of this...

--this day when, as a family of faith, we join with brothers and sisters the world over in celebrating anew the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ
--and, in so doing, we bear witness to a great many things
 --to Emmanuel (God with us)...the Word become flesh...the fulfillment of prophecy...the ushering in of a new covenant...
 --to a lot of theology: redemption, atonement, justification, sanctification, discipleship, stewardship
--indeed, it is between the twin pillars of the Incarnation and the cross, between Bethlehem and Golgotha, that all we believe as Christians, all on which we pin our hopes and our futures, is suspended
--and it is important that all these things be lifted up...lifted up and embraced and understood that we can bear witness to them...
 --this day, especially, though not only this day, but every day
--yet we should remember, too, the words of Paul to the church at Corinth:
 --if I have all these things yet have not love, I gain nothing...because of all these things, the most important is love

Love, perhaps more than anything else, is what the event we celebrate this day is about

--the prophecy we read about in Isaiah, the promise of deliverance, of peace, of a Messiah and a new kingdom...
--the words of the angels to the shepherds, the promise of good news and great joy and peace on earth...
--this is the message, the promise of all Scripture
 --it's the promise God made to Adam and Eve, a promise God tried to make good through covenants and judges and kings and prophets, through the choosing of one people to be a holy people, to be the vehicles by which the promise would become reality
--only, in the end, for God to know what God knew from the beginning... that out of God's unfathomable love for all God's children, God would have to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves

And so a child is born in Bethlehem, wrapped in rags, and laid in a manger

- the fulfillment of a promise...an act of faith, of deliverance...but more than anything else, an act of love
- because in the Word become flesh, God says to each and everyone of us, no matter who or what or where we are, "I love you and because I, God, love you, you are precious"
- therein is the spark of transformation...if we are redeemed, if we are washed clean, if we are once more restored to right relationship with God...if, indeed, we are transformed, it is because...
 - we understand that our real worth as human beings is not in what we own or who we know...
 - that our real motivation in sharing all the blessings we receive is not because a slick campaign or a sick economy has convinced us to...
 - we are transformed because the fact God so loves us that God became one of us and died for us gives each of us a worth, a value, a significance we can have no other way

And to the extent we understand *that*, we understand *this*

- the gift of love we receive from God, the gift we celebrate again this day, is not a gift for us alone...
- it is a gift we are to share with others...because as much as this day is about the fact of God's love for each of us, it is about the fact that, through us, day-in and day-out, God loves the world
 - Jesus was born and died one time, but because he rose he lives on, in and for and through each one of us
 - and so, too, does the love, the peace of God
- sometimes it lives in big ways, through the Mother Therasas and Martin Luther King Jrs. of the world
- but sometimes, too, in not-so-big ways, through a handful of students who, for a moment, give their teacher a glimpse of his dream
- because the gift of this love is limited only by our own willingness to share it

You probably know the *The Sound of Music* as a film...you know Maria as Julie Andrews
--but before *The Sound of Music* was a film, it was on Broadway and in the
Broadway version there is a song that doesn't appear in the film
--it is a song Maria sings, and it goes like this:

*A bell is no bell until you ring it;
A song is no song until you sing it;
And love in your heart wasn't put there to stay;
Love isn't love until you give it away.*

--on that night, 2000 years ago, in that stable in Bethlehem, that's what God did:
God gave God's love away
--gave it to me and to you...to everyone...that we find our worth as God's
children
--but, even more, God gave God's love that we who receive it give it
away, that the whole world might be loved
--because as surely as the sound of a bell not rung is silence, so, too, is
the sound of love not shared
--we love, John tells us, because God first loves us...*that*, my brothers and sisters
in Christ, is the meaning of Christmas