

# MY REPERTOIRE: HYMNS TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH

## 5. “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

John 19:13-30

Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet

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The *Tao Te Ching* is an ancient Chinese book of wisdom and scripture. It is attributed to a man named Lao Tzu - known in his day as the “Old Master” - who was born in the seventh century B.C. When Lao Tzu got up in years, he rode into the mountains in the hope of retiring to a province in the western frontiers of China. Along the way he was approached by a border official who urged the master to write down his teachings so they could be passed onto future generations. Lao Tzu did as he was asked, wrote the *Tao Te Ching*, and then continued westward and never was seen again.

The *Tao Te Ching* is arguably the most influential Chinese book of all time and is the most widely published book in the world after *The Bible*. The *Tao Te Ching* provides the basis for the philosophical school of Taoism, an important pillar of Chinese thought. Taoism teaches that there is one undivided truth at the root of all things, similar to what we in the church refer to as the “Logos” that most famously occurs at the beginning of the gospel of John. While the Chinese “Tao” often is translated as “way” and the Greek “Logos” as “word,” they are used similarly.

*In the beginning was the Logos (the Tao) and the Logos (the Tao) was with God and the Logos (the Tao) was God. The Logos (the Tao) was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through the Logos (the Tao) and without the Logos (the Tao) not one thing came into being. What came into being through the Logos (the Tao) was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the*

*darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*<sup>1</sup>

The Christian scripture goes on, of course, to claim that “*the Logos became flesh and lived among us*”<sup>2</sup> and that is John’s way of introducing Jesus.

Thanks to William Martin, an American minister in the Reformed Church in America and a longtime student of Taoism, I came into awareness of the *Tao Te Ching* about twenty ago. Around that time, Martin published a book entitled *The Art of Pastoring* that adapted the very brief 81 chapters of the *Tao Te Ching* as a wisdom book for pastors. It very much has shaped my pastoral life in the second half of my ministry.

Martin translates a portion of the second chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* as follows:

*The first part of our life  
was spent separating things into categories:  
good and bad,  
like and dislike,  
me and you,  
us and them.  
Now it is time to put all the pieces back together  
into a seamless whole.*<sup>3</sup>

Many of the conflicts and conflagrations endangering and despoiling the world today arise from our tendency to separate our experience into categories: *us and them, friend and foe, good and evil, winners and losers*. While such bifurcating of the world is perhaps a natural consequence of our early life development, some of us never outgrow it and thus we never envision the world whole but only as endlessly fractured and factionalized. That is both sad and sobering because if we cannot imagine the world whole, we never will know how to live toward it.

The goal of all religion and spirituality is peace. Not false peace. Not temporary or transitory peace. It is not the kind of peace the world predicates on power and dominance. Lori and I were at Penn State - Happy Valley - last night courtesy of the Smeltzers and saw people wearing t-shirts that read, “*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil because I am the baddest dude in the valley.*” That’s not going to do it. That is not going to get it done. Not that kind of peace.

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:1-5

<sup>2</sup> John 1:14

<sup>3</sup> Martin, William, *The Sage’s Tao Te Ching: Wisdom for the Second Half of Life*. New York: Marlowe and Company, 2000, p. 4.

Rather, it is the peace Christ gives and to which all of the great religions of the world in their own ways aspire. It is the peace in which all nations, peoples, and persons can flourish and thrive both inwardly and outwardly. It is the embodiment of the kingdom of God. It is why God identifies peacemakers as the children of God.<sup>4</sup>

If there is anyone who has shown us how to be a peacemaker and to “*put all of the pieces back together into a seamless whole,*” as the *Tao Te Ching* says, it is Jesus. It is why the cross stands at the heart of the Christian faith. “*When I survey the wondrous cross/On which the Prince of glory died.*” There was in Jesus deep and heartrending sorrow for a world that did not have the will to do the things that make for peace, that routinely broke the bruised reeds and quenched the dimly burning wicks of society, that not only permitted injustice but cultivated it, justified it, and reveled in it.<sup>5</sup> It was a world in which nations, empires, and their leaders battled for economic and military supremacy. It was a world largely like ours.

But there also was in Jesus a deep and heartfelt love for the world that caused him to subvert and to oppose the dominant, oppressive values engineered and embraced by those who profited from them. Jesus anticipated a world in which opportunities do not accrue only to a privileged class but to everyone, a world in which all people are protected by a criminal justice system and not just some, a world in which there is mutual respect between men and women, a world in which healthcare is affordable and accessible to everyone and not just the well-to-do. The Bible speaks poetically of this great leveling:

*Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.  
Every valley will be filled,  
and every mountain and hill will be made low,  
and the crooked will be made straight,  
and the rough ways made smooth;  
and all flesh together will see the salvation of God.*<sup>6</sup>

To show that love is stronger than fear and stronger than death, Jesus did not waver in his pursuit of a society in which even the last, lost, least, and littlest can do well, in which enemies are loved into friendship, and in which grace and hope abound. Jesus did not falter even as he was being nailed to a cross, a cross from which both sorrow and love flowed mingled down.

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:9

<sup>5</sup> Luke 19:41-42

<sup>6</sup> Luke 3:4-6

Sorrow and love are more intertwined than even the proverbial wheat and tares. It is so because we are called to love and to love truly is truly costly. Love is costly because it bids us to give our lives away in the service of others. But, as Isaac Watts put it, such a life is eminently worth the price which is not less than everything.

*When I survey the wondrous cross/On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride.*

No matter what heights we may reach in our lives, none of us, St. Paul says, has reason or room to boast in light of Christ's extravagant self-giving. "*Let the one who boasts,*" Paul says, "*boast in the Lord.*"<sup>7</sup> Watts says it this way:

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,/Save in the death of Christ my God!  
All the vain things that charm me most/I sacrifice them to His blood.*

Life was no less precious to Jesus and longevity was no less treasured by him than they are by us. Jesus had no death wish. It is bad theology that claims Jesus had no choice but to die to fulfill a plan. Rather, Jesus said, "*No one takes my life from me; I lay it down of my own accord.*"<sup>8</sup>

Jesus had a choice either to follow the way of costly love in the world or to cast that way aside when it became too expensive. But the One who said, "*Those who seek to save their lives will lose them while those who give their lives to love for my sake will find life,*" did not hold back. But neither did Jesus go to the cross whistling Easter hymns as some would have us believe. He went with tears and anguish and sorrow. He gave his life *to* others during his life and he gave his life *for* others in his death, not because he had some sort of resurrection guarantee worked out ahead of time that ensured everything would turn out alright - no "art of the deal" with Jesus - but because he trusted that love, no matter its consequences, is God's way in the world and he had determined to remain obedient to it.

There is no such thing as love without risk. Or love without sorrow. *Sorrow and love flow mingled down.* The more we love the more we will grieve and groan because love necessarily leads us into a larger experience of the world in which there are many sorrowful things. Where do we ever get the idea that life is about building walls and comfort zones around us and among us so that we cannot be touched by the hurt of the world or escape the pain? That is not a Christian life. Where do we get the idea that life is about acquiring for ourselves greater and greater bliss and protection even as others languish and suffer? That is not a Christian life. Not

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:31

<sup>8</sup> John 10:18

when we claim to follow a man whose life went to seed and fell into the ground and died so that it could bear much fruit.<sup>9</sup>

*See from His head, His hands, His feet,  
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!  
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,  
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?*

That last image is a piercing one. The crown of thorns pressed down on the head of Jesus by his accusers and assailants as he was crucified was meant to deride and humiliate. “So, you are a king?” they asked. “Well, here is your crown,” they taunted him, laughing, as they crushed the thorns into his skull. But they only mocked themselves as those “*who did not know what they were doing.*”<sup>10</sup> They did not know that while they were taking a life, Jesus was giving his for the sake of the world and all people, even them. It is why St. Paul said, of him, “*Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made various groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between them.*”<sup>11</sup>

All are one and all is one in Christ. Even those who know him by another name or no name at all are included in this unity. If all would be cognizant of our commonality in Christ, that on the cross he died for all, we could allow our brotherhood and sisterhood to take hold and to grow in us and it would be beautiful in the world. Christ’s peace indeed would reign. It would look something like St. Paul described:

*If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests only but to the interests of others. And let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John 12:24-26

<sup>10</sup> Luke 23:34

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 2:14

<sup>12</sup> Philippians 2:1-5

Our hymn today is in my repertoire really because of the final stanza. How can any of us repay God for all God does for us in Christ, in the Logos, the Tao, in Jesus of Nazareth? There is nothing good in our lives that in tracking it back does not finally end in God. The cross is the epitome of the life lived and lost for each of us so that we may claim with another hymnwriter, “*I once was lost, but now am found...*”<sup>13</sup> As Paul says it, “*He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins, and life!*”<sup>14</sup>

We owe God everything for our lives. Not that God keeps track or waits to collect on a debt but the life Christ opens to us is so filled with deep meaning, grace, and beauty that God wants everyone to get in on it and to give our all to it. Watts writes for us all when he says,

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

That really is what stewardship is, isn't it? It is our response of gratitude for all God does for us and gives to us. Stewardship is our desire to nurture it and care for it and to share it with others. Our stewardship of the gospel best is expressed by offering our lives in readiness to love and to pray; to do justice and to dance and sing and to welcome the lowly; to be generous in our spirit and to forgive and to forego; to rejoice in hope, to be patient in suffering, to contribute to the needs of others, and to extend hospitality to strangers.<sup>15</sup>

Stewardship is realizing we are a part of the divine ethos that, when we are faithful to it, turns an upside down world right side up to the glory of God and to the joy of all people.

Giving today your offering and your pledges of financial support for next year are signs of your desire to live your gratitude to God. And they are signs of your commitment to care for this community called Market Square Presbyterian Church as we continue together to make our witness to God's great, inclusive, expansive love.

Thanks be to God! And thanks be to God for you!

Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> Lyric from “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound,” text by John Newton.

<sup>14</sup> Colossians 1:13-14

<sup>15</sup> Romans 12:12-13

