

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
July 16, 2006
www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

Behrman's Masterpiece
John 11: 20-27; 33-35

To understand "Behrman's Masterpiece," you must understand Jason McElwain's masterpiece. This name might not be familiar to everyone, but Jason McElwain is one of our country's more intriguing sports personalities, a young man whose rise to stardom has been as swift as it has been improbable. You see, a few months ago, at the end of the regular season, a basketball coach decided to do a decent thing: he told his senior student manager to suit up to play for the final home game, and with four minutes left in the game the coach inserted this kid into his lineup who had never played a minute throughout his high school career. What made the moment extraordinarily special was the fact this student manager suffers from autism. Upon entering the game Jason McElwain shot a three and missed – badly -- an air ball. His coach prayed a quick, silent prayer: 'Please, Lord, just let him score once.' His prayer was answered: the next time Jason came down the floor, he swished a three. Then he swished another. Then another. Then another. Then another. Then another. The crowd was going nuts as this kid was popping three-pointers from all over the court. As the game ended, shooting from NBA three-point range, he swished yet another. As the buzzer sounded, the entire gym joyously stormed the court and carried the kid off on their shoulders in celebration. The legend of J Mac was born.

ESPN picked up the J-Mac story, as did CNN, *Sports Illustrated*, and Oprah. President Bush wanted to meet J Mac; celebrities wanted to meet J Mac. Thousands of letters began to pour into this kid's household, one of which caught his parents' eye. "Dear Jason," it began, "we are so proud of your accomplishments. You are a special inspiration to us. We, too, have an autistic child, a toddler. Basketball has been our life. Your example makes us think that our child might grow up to do some amazing things too – maybe even in basketball. Thank you, Jason McElwain. *You have given us hope.*"

This is my theme for the morning, the power that each of us has to give hope to other people. Strange as it sounds, chilling as it is to ponder, your words, your deeds, your actions, your gestures have the ability to give the very power of life unto another human being. We have within us the power to give hope. Elie Wiesel in his memoir *All Rivers Run to the Sea* writes of his life in Nazi concentration camps. Wiesel offered this searing observation about the gift of hope: "[Our captors] tried to get the inmates to think only of themselves, to forget relatives and friends. . . . But what happened was just the reverse. Those who retreated to a universe limited to their own bodies had less chance of getting out alive, while to live for a brother or a friend, an ideal, helped you hold out longer. As for me, I could cope because of my father. Without him, I could not have resisted. I would see him coming with his heavy gait, seeking a smile, and I would give it to him. He was my support and my oxygen, and I was his." Together, father and son gave each other the hope necessary to kindle the will to live.

Our Lord kept before his eyes at all times in his ministry the responsibility of giving hope unto others.

His charisma, his spiritual strength, his rootedness in God's energy and power, attracted people to him in their need.

We are not surprised at all that Martha sees Jesus coming to console her in the wake of her brother's death and runs to him in expectation. "Oh, my Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. I know even now that whatever you ask of God, God will give you."

Ah, Dr. Kremer, you might say, it is one thing to speak of Jesus giving hope unto other people. Jesus, after all, was spiritually mature, his personality perfectly centered in God's will.

He was completely grounded in God's energy and love.

It is only natural that he would give hope to others. He was the perfect soul.

It is quite another thing to talk about people like you and me giving hope to other people.

We cannot presume to think that we have our spiritual act together in the same way Jesus did.

Surely you would have to admit, Dr. Kremer, that a person has to have hope within themselves before they can give hope unto others.

That sounds logical. But human beings are not logical creatures.

Human beings have a penchant for seeing hope in others even when they cannot see it in themselves.

For example, your best friend comes to you and tells you that her marriage is breaking up.

She has tried hard to make her relationship work, but all her efforts have come to naught.

She sees only failure; you who know her well see instead an opportunity for a fresh start.

She feels useless. You see in her beauty, charm, intelligence and energy.

She sees herself on the edge of night. You see her on the edge of a new life.

She feels herself at a dead end; you see avenues opening up all around her.

She sees no future ahead of her; you see hope abounding.

Yet you cannot see any of that hope within yourself!

It takes that friend or another friend to remove the veil so you can see the hope that lies within yourself.

The story is told of a painter named Johnsy who lived in Greenwich Village and became stricken with pneumonia in the late-nineteenth century, when this disease was often fatal.

Indeed, the young woman, dissatisfied with her progress as an artist, and considering herself a failure, decided that there was nothing left to do with her worthless existence but allow pneumonia to end it.

She said to her roommate Sue, a tender, compassionate girl,

"When the last leaf falls off that vine out there, I will die, too. I've known it for three days.

There are only five leaves left now."

Sue tried to kindle hope in her friend and could not. She went downstairs to confide in a fellow painter

who lived below them, a gruff, rough, dissipated alcoholic by the name of Behrman,

who was always going to paint a masterpiece, but had never gotten around to it.

Though he was a bitter man, he was enraged when he heard of Johnsy's despair, because he held a tender spot in his heart for these two girls, and he was furious that this young woman was giving up on life when he saw so much potential in her.

On the climactic night of Johnsy's health a storm moved through New York City, and though Sue kept the blind down, they could hear the rain falling and the wind blowing. In the morning snow fell.

Sue did not want to raise the blind in the morning, but Johnsy commanded her to do so.

There, to her amazement, amidst the winter storm, was one last leaf, green around the stem,

but yellow around the edges, showing clear signs of decay and deterioration – but hanging on.

As she watched that leaf endure throughout the day, Johnsy began to be filled with hope,

and she said to Sue, "It is it a sin to want to die. I intend to live."

Not long thereafter, as Johnsy improved, Behrman died of pneumonia. Eventually, Sue told her why.

"On your critical night, Behrman went out and painted his masterpiece, one last leaf on the wall,

showing the interplay of maturity and decay, a leaf that would give you hope enough to live.” Behrman’s masterpiece was the gift of a last leaf that saved a life through hope.

Most of you might recognize that tale as a famous short story.

What you might not know is, the man who wrote it lived in many ways Behrman’s story.

His name was William Sydney Porter, born not far from here, in Greensboro.

He was a bank teller in Austin, Texas, who was arrested for embezzlement.

Scholars debate his guilt to this day, but one thing is certain: he was so afraid of prison that he fled the country. But when he learned that his young wife was dying,

he returned and turned himself in, so he could be by her bedside when she passed away.

After her death, he was sentenced to five years in prison.

They had a young daughter.

Wanting to support her, and wanting even more to make her proud of him,

this man began to write stories. Because he didn’t want people to know from where he was writing he chose the pen name by which he is now known throughout the world: O. Henry.

When he was released from prison, he continued to write, and became one of the most renowned authors in the world, known for his quirky, surprising endings, and whose theme time after time was holding to hope amidst adversity.

Like Behrman, the hope he gave unto others, he never could find within himself.

He died, an alcoholic, of cirrhosis of the liver in New York City.

He is buried in Asheville. The daughter, for whom he took up his pen, is buried beside him.

My point is, you don’t have to have your life totally together to be able to give hope unto somebody else.

You don’t have to wait until your pain has gone away before you can give a gift of hope to others.

In fact, in your pain you are frequently more attuned to the agony of others

and are better able to reach out to others and give them strength, nurturing their will to live.

It is not surprising that our Lord feels the pain that Martha feels, for he suffers a similar grief.

When he stands before Lazarus’ tomb, he cries. Jesus wept!

The importance of this verse is such that I cannot begin to address its meaning today, but suffice it to say, that when our Lord stood before that tomb, he felt the disorder of the world in the depths of his being – it shook him. As he stood before that tomb, the void left by death, rattled his soul -- and he cried.

It is only because our Lord cries, only because our Lord has felt the hopelessness of the void that often seems to border our lives, that his words have any meaning for us in our own despair.

Superficial people who go around in the wake of tragedy saying, “It will be better by the bye,” have nothing truly meaningful to say about the power of hope.

Only the people who have weathered tragedy, hopelessness, rejection, failure and despair, and have emerged from their pain with a meaningful relationship to the divine –

these are the people to whom others turn to find a word of hope amidst the dark nights of their soul.

You do not need to wait until your pain is over and your life is all together before you give the gift of hope.

You can reach out to others from the depths of your own disquiet and speak meaningfully to their inner disorder. Indeed, perhaps you can heal them with a word of hope.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s classic novel, *The Brothers Karamasov*, one of his characters tells a disturbing story about a wicked, self-centered old woman who died and was sent to hell.

While in hell, her cries for mercy move an angel to take pity on her, and

this angel comes down to ask if she has ever done one good deed in her entire life.

She thinks for a while and says, “Once upon a time I gave a hungry beggar an onion.”

The angel says, "Okay, I will come down and let you grab hold of that onion; you can be pulled up to heaven." When the angel brings the onion, the woman latches onto it, and sure enough, she begins to rise from torment. As she rises, she feels others beginning to grab hold of her arms and legs so as to be pulled up to heaven, too.

She begins kicking violently, yelling, "No, it's my onion, my onion! Get off!"

She flails about so violently, trying to shake everyone else free of her, that she loses hold of her onion and falls back into hell.

The point of the story is very simple: until you are ready to share your gift with others, you are not yet ready to enter the Kingdom of God.

What is your onion this morning? What is the gift that God has given you? What are you doing with that gift? How much hope are you giving people's lives?

To an autistic child God gave the love of shooting basketball.

To a father and son in a concentration camp God gave the gift of mutual need.

To a dissipated artist God gave the onion of creating one masterpiece to save a life.

To a disgraced bank teller God gave the gift of telling stories.

What is your gift? What is your onion? Are you using it to give hope to someone else's life?

God intends for us amidst our pain to open our eyes and be on the lookout, because God will be sending us a Behrman to create a masterpiece to give us hope.

God intends for us to open our eyes to see those around us who are despairing and to use our talents and insights to create a masterpiece to give them hope.

Such is the way of the children of God. Such is the way of the disciples of Christ.

Why are we commissioning adults and young people this day to go out into the world to build Habitat Houses and minister to the impoverished?

It is because we believe that God has called us to create hope, to give the gift of hope where we find despair. What is your gift? Use it to give hope.

This is a message that you can take out into the world, out into the darkness of people's lives.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

July 16, 2006