

How Do You Hold a Moonbeam in Your Hand?

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Galatians 5:1; 13-25
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You remember the story and the song from which tonight's message's title comes, no? "*Doe, a deer, a female deer, ray, a drop of golden sun ...*" Ring any ... um ... bells?

The Sound of Music depicts the eventual scenario of just about any home, or any religious institution—or any life—for that matter. Scene one, picture a free spirit, one unbound by hardened rules and expectations from the usual suspect list of authority figures.... You know, parents, church, government, society. Our burned-in image of Maria is of her bursting across a mountain top, helicopter camera zooming in on her, and she operatically sings her unbounded freedom: "The hills are ALIVE, with the sound of MUSIC!"

Scene Two, back at the convent: Um ... Maria, you know you were late ... again. And what is it with all this "hills being alive" business? Are you into pantheism now? We Catholics don't do animism! Do we need to check out your theology ... again? And this Music? Is that some code or something? Are you going up into those hills for some wink-wink? You know that we are nuns, and we serve God and humanity because we pray. It's worked for thousands of years, and so let's please get inside, work on your compliance and complines (COMP-lins). Get a little knee-time in, OK?

Gotcha! They had Maria—or what they thought was her—located, defined, confined on their spiritual GPS's. It was a well-rehearsed set-up, a trip-up trap by the trap-makers. To herd yet another free soul into Plato's Cave of Mirrors, of religious trappings and images. The head of the convent calls Maria in, encouraging her to think about another calling in life. Like a sorority or fraternity, the powers determined that Maria is obviously not one for their rule and order.

The nuns could then sing, guilt-free:
"How do you solve a problem like Maria? How do you catch a cloud and pin it down? How do you find a word that means Maria? How do you keep a wave upon the sand? How do you hold a moonbeam in your hand?"

Why do we like people like Maria? Why do we want Marias to be around us? Do not they remind us of ourselves, when we were younger, or as we want to remain as we grow up? Is not her freedom similar to the kinds of free gas that rock-and-roll wants to breathe? "Don't bring me down" "Won't get fooled again." "Keep on rocking in the free world." "The fool on the hill." Is not this freedom the defiance of those first four famous chords of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Dun-dun-dun-DUNNNN! [DO IT ON THE PIANO!! A-Flat to E] Is not Maria still alive in us? Every person—I think—is at some point the captain of her soul, the master of his dreams. Is she not somehow like us when we are at our best?

I'm reminded of my own daughter. When Sophie was quite young, 2-3 years old, she would dance at any and every stimulation. Music on the radio had her jiving. A boom-car on the street would have her stomping in time, mostly. High-brow ballet on the TV, to her, was a participatory sport. She did not so much dance as pound. Her every movement, however, was a kind of joyous, if chaotic and reckless disregard for body discipline or beat awareness. She did not care for the names of Martha Graham or Baryshnikov. That was her parents' concern. After her concerned parents encouraged her reckless behavior one time too many, it all became phony. Now, with an audience to please, for Sophie to dance as if no one were watching was no longer an option. The moonbeam now became something to grasp, to bottle, to market. Self-consciousness, running up against expectations, killed something that day.

Hum along with me to Don McLean:

A long, long time ago...

I can still remember // How that music used to make me smile.

And I knew if I had my chance // That I could make those people dance

And, maybe, they'd be happy for a while.

*But February made me shiver // With every paper I'd deliver.
Bad news on the doorstep; // I couldn't take one more step.
And something touched me deep inside // The day the music died.
I knew I was out of luck // The day the music died.
Do you recall what was revealed // The day the music died?
I saw Satan laughing with delight // The day the music died.*

How do you keep music alive, the moonbeam in your hand? And keep that hand open, not fisted? How do you maintain the poetry of life when its hard edges make you want to curl up, fetal position, and shut out everything? (Introverts: You know I'm speaking our language here!) How do you keep that lava flowing beneath the crust and the Pro*crust*ean beds?

For everyone in an institution has a recurring decision to make, I think. It is that choice to listen to the spirit, keep that channel open and free, voluntarily to place oneself under that wild & untamed magic, and keep that dance alive. OR ... cave, settle, go with the cultural flow.

Once upon a time there was a polar bear in a zoo. Small cage. In which it would pace back and forth, back and forth. One day the zoo got religion, took out the small cages, and gave its animals larger, more natural habitats. But that bear, for years after, would pace back and forth, in the same groove it had worn while caged, even though the cage itself was gone.

I am not against cages, sometimes. I am not against institutions and their systems. We need them to provide us memory from the past ... guidance into the future. They are the mother and father birds, teaching and urging us to fly, holding our hand, like a bridge over troubled waters. But at one point, we must fly the nest, and leave the bridge behind.

Jesus felt this tension, I think. He was a new kind of person in an established world. Holy lava beneath the crust of his society, and hardly trying to start a new religion, I can see him rethinking his heritage. At the risk of sounding anti-Semitic, he sought then what he would seek today in any context: to introduce a leaven of freedom into the rigor that old-time religion practices, where people drift through the motions, but can't really articulate why. His lava could not be remote-controlled. His freedom could not be bound by forms or cookie cutters. I bet Jesus' kindergarten teacher exclaimed day after day: "Jesus, you're supposed to color within the lines!"

People who followed Jesus learned one thing over and over: that if they followed him, he would take them into uncharted territory. In his healings, his wondrous deeds, his teachings, his actions, he did things no one had done before. But he paid the price for it. He drove people nuts then ... and he still can. How do you solve a problem like ... Jesus? How would you start to bottle him for market? How does one bottle joy and freedom?

This sort of joyous freedom is that for which we are made. This freedom, I'll teach to my dying day, is the very thing that makes us most human. We are made of freedom. OK, let me get woo-hoo on you: Moonbeams, more than doctrines, connect us up inside, soul to body, spirit to God. Jesus means freedom! Like a muscle which we exercise, this freedom is to develop... Like doing one thing every day that scares the heck out of us. So—by all means—use the institutional maps and societal rules to take one to the ends of the orthodox world. But then, then take one more step, in faith, into places where these rules cannot illuminate.... This is our way, our truth, our life.

In Galatians, Paul gets very adamant about the freedom dance that being connected up to Jesus elicits. It is the 50s, A.D., a critical moment in the early churches. How do they define, and how shall they contrast, their mission and identity against the backdrop of their religious heritages? Do Christians circumcise? If I follow old rituals and festivals, does that make me more—or less—Christian? What about food laws? Can I eat shrimp and be a Jesus-follower? Just how many rules do I need to keep to remain copasetic with Jesus?

Paul made darn sure that one Christian contrast was crystal clear: It is God that secures the

relationship with Jesus, through Jesus. We are free of any practice or custom that might cement it. Nothing we do can enable or dis-enable that. Shrimp do not matter. Circumcision? Please! Christ's death destroyed any power of these jots and tittles to make one a better Christian, or a worse one. It's all freedom. All moonbeams. God's grace is larger than any religious vehicle that we may pimp up to ride. The only way to get onboard is to open one's hand to the moonbeam. It cannot be controlled. Control-freaking, as one refrigerator magnet has it, is a soul disease.

Paul wrote furiously to the Galatian churches that this free life was not one linked up to rules and correct behavior. It is established by God in Jesus. The Christian is someone created free, and ever-freed up to live a life of open-handed liberty. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul fulminates against the old guard who intimidated the young freedom-loving Christians into giving up their freedom salad for a mess of old pottage. He was furious with the Christians themselves for craving and then caving to such pressure. His entire letter is a strident declaration of freedom, the Bible's ode to joyous freedom. A delicate, subtle gift, it can get easily squandered, neglected and perverted. This freedom is like my key to my front door. It works, but I cannot force it. If I force the lock, turn my key hard, I break the key. The "key" is to jiggle, to dance that key just right in the keyhole, and I'm in.

Often when people get their hands on religion, they close them, to wield religion as a dividing tool. "You're in, you're out..." "Saved, not saved" "OK; not-so-OK". Gotta keep the people in their place! The history of religious manipulation and coercion is as long as it is tedious. That's why for some of us, this Circle of Mercy is the free gas that we knew just HAD to exist ... somewhere.

But even we have our tensions, about what it means to be the normal Circle member. Do I have to get more politically active to prove I belong here? Do I have to get in trouble with some authority to be a better member? Do I have to preach as well as Nancy, Joyce, or Ken? (Gosh, I hope not!!) Do I have to bring the coolest organic salad to be more accepted here? If I do none of these things, do I belong? What do I have to DO to belong?

Puh-leeze! We are made for freedom, set free. Do not get enslaved by any other kind of slavery. Let's cue Bob Marley: *Triumphantly, Won't you help to sing these songs of freedom? 'Cause all I ever have [are] Redemption songs, Redemption songs. // Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery.*

A story, and then I'm finished. Japanese Buddhist monks Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain fell.

Coming around a bend, they met a lovely young woman in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

"Come on, girl!" said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud. Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he no longer could restrain himself. "We monks don't go near females," he told Tanzan, "especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?"

"I left the girl there, by the side of the road," said Tanzan. "Are you still carrying her?"

And now, a poem. Here are some lines from Carl Sandburg:

*You were made for joy, child.
The feet of you were carved for that
The ankles of you run for that.
The rise of the rain, the sift of wind,
the drop of a red star on a far water rim—
An endless catalogue of shouts, laughs,
silent contemplations—
they made you from day to day — for joy, child.*

Once we open the hands, and empty the cup, and clear the mind, and silence the old tapes,

something fragile happens. We call it freedom. May we be grateful recipients of the fullest measures of grace and freedom, for which we are made, and which may we live out as leaven in this crusty ol' world.

Amen.