

“*Bridge to Nowhere and Everywhere*”

June 1, 2008

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“A Prayer for Responsibility for Children” (Ina J. Hughes, *The Knoxville News Sentinel*)

We pray for children
who put chocolate fingers everywhere
who love to be tickled
who stomp in puddles and ruin their new pants,
who sneak Popsicles before supper,
who erase holes in math workbooks,
who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those
who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,
who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers,
who never “counted potatoes”,
who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead in,
who never go the circus,
who live in an X-rated world.

We pray for children
who bring us sticky kisses and fists full of dandelions
who sleep with the dog and bury the goldfish
who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money,
who cover themselves with band-aids and sing off key,
who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink,
who slurp their soup.

And then we pray for those
who never get dessert,
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,
who watch their parents watch them die,
who can't find any bread to steal,
who don't have any rooms to clean up,
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,
whose monsters are real.

We pray for children
who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,
who thrown tantrums in the grocery store and pick a their good,
who like ghost stories,
who shove dirty clothes under the bed and never rinse out the tub,
who get visits from the tooth fairy,
who don't like to be kissed in front of the car-pool,
who squirm in church or temple, and scream in the phone,
whose tears we sometimes laugh at, whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those whose nightmares come in the daytime,
 who will eat anything
 who have never seen a dentist,
 who aren't spoiled by anyone,
 who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,
 who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried and
 for those who must,
 for those we never give up on and for those
 who don't get a second chance.

For those we smother...and those who will grab the hand of
 anyone kind
 enough
 enough to offer it,
 we pray.

Amen.



Sermon:

As everyone probably knows by now, I grew up in the little northern Ohio town of Clyde. The house I grew up in is still there and my brother lives in it. It sits on a hill above an extended wooded valley and tiny Raccoon Creek runs through it. The woods offered endless hours of pleasure for the kids in the neighborhood as we explored and built tree houses and camped out overnight and played Cowboys and Indians and Cops and Robbers in them.

Every Spring the rains would come and Raccoon Creek would swell and overflow its banks. This provided another delight for us—to figure out how to cross over the middy waters. It was at this time that my interest in building bridges was born.

We usually began the challenge by dropping the biggest log we could find over the water. Then came the challenge of attempting to walk precariously over that log—that was great fun, but if you fell in the icy waters, you knew it was time to make the bridge more of a bridge and less of a high-wire circus act.

Next, we'd drop another log next to the first one and then add planks sideways and then maybe even put up a hand rail so that even old-timers could get across the troubled waters.

Never during these exciting times did we ask *why* we needed to cross the ten-foot wide creek. Like the mountain climbers, I suppose, "it was there" and that was good enough reason. This is the way the adolescent minds works.

Like my young playmates, it was only years later, maybe when I got to college, that I even thought about the WHY question. Not only about building bridges across Raccoon Creek, but about building any kind of bridge to enable myself and others to get from *here* to *there*.

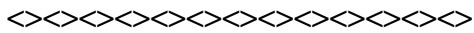
That *why* question becomes increasingly important as you consider the risks involved, first in building the bridge and then making sure the thing is safe once it's up.

We only have to remember the Interstate 34W bridge in Minneapolis, and how it fell down last year right in the middle of rush hour. (In fact, for two years prior to the fall, the bridge—Minnesota’s busiest—has been determined to be “structurally deficient” by government inspectors. It was, they said, “an accident waiting to happen.”)

There are, indeed, many other stories of many other bridges falling apart. Also, many stories of other vital infrastructures all over the country seriously deteriorated. We won’t even talk about the viaduct right here in Seattle, except to say that a viaduct is a kind of a bridge.

We also will not speak of Gravina Island, Alaska, and its now famous “bridge to nowhere”, a \$398 million extravaganza to connect the island (and its airport) with the mainland at Ketchikan. We may not speak of it today, but Alaska’s senator Ted Stevens became so exercised over the possibility that Congress would divert funds from it to recovery efforts from Hurricane Katrina, that he pounded on the lectern and threatened to quit the Senate if the funds were removed from his state.

Once again, the *why* question was not truthfully addressed.



What are some other kinds of bridges? Or better yet, what are some kinds of ways that people get across the troubled waters?

Our children’s story about Moses and the Israelites tells of one way to get over: Have God come down and split open the Red Sea and allow the people to walk over the dry land at the bottom.

Another biblical example is the proposal to walk on the water, also an act of great risk, as Peter found out, *but it can be done!*

Here in Seattle you can take a ferry *over* the waters. In San Francisco, you can ride BART, the public transit system, which burrows *under* the water. You could always *swim* across, like the Polar Bear Club does on New Year’s Day. You can take flying lessons, perhaps from Daedalus and his son Icarus, on learning to *fly* over.

I propose that we broaden this idea of bridging to include other ways we human beings have devised to cross over.

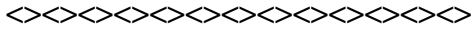
What is a bridge, after all? In its simplest form it is a *passageway* from one place to another place, sometimes crossing over what may otherwise be an impassable obstacle. How do we get from *here* to *there*? A bridge is one way, but there are actually many ways we humans move on our journey from here to there.

And why do people feel the need to cross over? Where is *here* and where is *there*? Where do we want to go? What do we want to do, to accomplish over there? And what’s so bad about just staying on this side of the obstacle?

William Faulkner, in his acceptance speech upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, explained that in his opinion, the Exodus story is the fundamental human story. It’s about the universal need to move on to a better place, in this case, “The Promised Land”. And in this story, it’s about moving from bondage to freedom. From despair to hope. From hopelessness to the promise of hope.

It is a universal human need to move on. Unfortunately—or maybe simply because “it is there”—there is always a barrier, some kind of obstacle, which prevents us from crossing over.

Sometimes the circumstances are whimsical, like when we imagine that the grass is greener on the other side. Sometimes, it is deadly serious as in the barrier called the River Styx, the barrier between the living and the dead, guarded by Charon who provides the bridge.



A bridge, after all, is a metaphor, and there many ways we can think about this.

Let's talk about the *bridge-builders*, the ones who create the way. I propose this morning that the bridge-builders are none other than ourselves, you and me, as we find ways to cross over in our journeys and make the way for others.

Look at how this happens.

This morning there are three of our young people who are not here. They are our Coming of Age initiates and they are spending the weekend out "in the field" for their Initiation Weekend, something like a Vision Quest. This time is designed so that those among us who are coming of age, who are moving from one stage in their lives as children to the next stage when they become adults. This process is in all cultures and all religions, for it is one of the most important times of an individual's life.

This weekend, our three children are crossing over a bridge. Luckily, and with much forethought and preparations, they are being accompanied by none other than the bridge-builders in our congregation. That's Scott Richard and the other fine builders on the COA Advisory Group, as well as their individual mentors.

Parents and guardians are builders of bridges. And so are teachers and Big Brothers and Big Sisters and even preachers and prophets and the Community of Faith in its entirety.

It is true: *you and I* are the builders of bridges which people can use to cross over so many kinds of troubled waters. When we attend to those who are in need—in any way or form or circumstance—we are making a way for people to move from a place of trouble and perhaps even despair to a place of health and hope.

For people of faith, this is our *calling*. This is our *sacred duty*. This is our *ministry* in the world. For it is a ministry for the betterment of the community, both within these walls and without, even as it ministers to our very own selves.

Hear the song:

Like a Bridge over trouble waters, I will ease you mind.

Like a bridge over troubled waters, I will lay me down.

BENEDICTION: SLT # 468: "We Need One Another"

We need one another when we mourn and would be comforted.

We need on another when we are in trouble and afraid.

We need one another when we are in despair,

in temptation, and need to be recalled to our best selves again.

We need one another when we would accomplish some great purpose, and cannot do it alone.

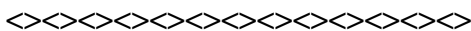
We need one another in the hours of success, when we look for someone to share our triumphs.

We need one another in the hour of defeat, when with encouragement we might endure and stand again.

We need one another when we come to die, and would have gentle hands prepare us for the journey.

All our lives we are in need, and others are in need of us.

(George E. Odell, #468 in SLT)



Let us sing the song of affirmation, "Wake Now My Senses" #298 in our hymnal.