



SILK PURSES OUT OF SOWS' EARS

April 10, 2016, The Third Sunday in Easter

Acts 9:1-6; John 21:15-17

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Theme: Because God believes in us, we should believe in each other.

Speak to us, O God, unworthy of any word as we may be, as unworthy as angry Saul or fickle Peter. Unstop our ears that we might hear Your word, whether it comes in Scripture or sermon, or comes whispered in the noise of daily life. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

“You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear,” or so they say. They’re doubtless right. *You* can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. *I* can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. But it can be done.

God, the Bible tells us, is forever making something like silk purses out of sows’ ears. God choose Abraham to start Israel, Abraham, who betrayed his wife to a lustful Pharaoh. There was Moses, a murderer on the lam who hated making speeches. There was King David, runt of the litter, consummate philander, arguably a murderer. The prophet Amos, whose only previous experience had been as a migrant farm worker. And John the Baptist, who lived in the woods, dressed in a loincloth, ate bugs, and yelled.

And this litany of silk purses made from sows’ ears extends beyond the pages of scripture: Francis of Assisi, “St. Francis,” the spoiled child of Italian nobility who paraded in the raw through the town square to make a point about worldly goods. John Calvin, bookish and sickly French law student booted out of the Sorbonne and on the run. The English abolitionist John Newton who wrote the last hymn we’ll sing today. Newton had run away from home as a teenager and become captain of a slave ship. God chose *him* to work for the abolition of the slave trade.



That great theologian of the 19th Century, Soren Kierkegaard, friendless, forlorn, cranky, and unlucky in love. More recently, the late Mother Teresa, displaced Albanian countess, willful, obstinate, and politically incorrect.

In the two Bible stories we just heard, it's more of the same. In the first scripture reading Woody read, Christ chooses Saul, soon to be Paul. This is the same Saul who had held the coats of those who stoned Stephen to death – Stephen the first Christian martyr. Later, as this Saul was on this way to arrest Christians in Damascus and carry them back to Jerusalem for trial, God chooses this sow's ear to be Apostle to the Gentiles, no less. And in the Gospel reading, Christ charges Peter to take over by loving those whom Jesus loved. This is the same Peter who, on the night of Jesus' crucifixion, had denied he even *knew* "what's his name from Galilee." Three times he denied Christ! Yet God called *him* to "feed his lambs."

This narrative thread is woven throughout the Bible and history. Time and time again, God zeroes in on sow's ears. The obvious take-home is that the Divine Eye simply does not see you and me, or any human beings for that matter, like we do. God does not see us for who we *are*; rather God sees us for who we *can potentially* be. God believes in us, no matter what. Even if we stop believing in God, God believes in us. Despite outward appearances, despite the worst we have done, God knows we can always be better than our worst. As they say, "Every sinner has a future."

A young woman named Jill Duffield is the new editor of a venerable bi-weekly magazine called *The Presbyterian Outlook*. In a recent column, she told a story about her husband, who "chairs the board of a small, local nonprofit working in the area of affordable housing. They have a warehouse of items that have been donated to help with maintaining houses – everything from sod to kitchen sinks. The space to keep all these things," she writes, "has been blessedly donated, but recently the owner finally found a paying client and rented out the space. A new free location was found, but there was the need to move everything: shelving, appliances, bags of grass seed, Christmas decorations and much more. The time frame was tight and the available volunteers few. Calls were made and somehow it



came to pass that some inmates from the county prison were enlisted into service. The morning of the move, one of the volunteers brought donuts and coffee; later in the day, she made a hot dog lunch for everything. Prisoners, guards, and volunteers worked side by side and got the job done... The atmosphere was joyous..." Jill's "husband said of the inmates, 'They were really nice guys. We couldn't have done it without them.'"

Jill reflects on the experience: "I have no idea why these men were incarcerated. They were all in the last months of their sentences, eager to move forward, glad for a day outside the prison gates... I am sure their crimes were costly not just to them, but to others. But even so," she concludes, "what I know is true of them and is true of all of us is this: We are more than the worst thing we have ever done. We are greater than the sum of our mistakes and misdeeds. Forgiveness is real. Reconciliation is possible. Transformation happens... Those inmates are... beloved children of God for whom Christ died and through whom the Triune God surely has the power to work for good."

The challenge this sets before you and me is simple enough: if God knows that something like silk purses can be made out any of us, sows' ears that we are, if God can always see promise in us, all of us, it means that *we* are called to look for the same potential in one another. It means that we're called to see each other as God sees us,

to see the promise in every family member, even the most difficult,
to see the promise in our co-workers, even the most bull-headed,
to see the promise in our neighbors, even the most impossible,
to see the promise in fellow church members, even the most tiresome.

"They are beloved children of God" all of them, "for whom Christ died and through whom the Triune God surely has the power to work for good."

This affirmation calls to mind the old chestnut about the gas-station attendant who was asked by a family visiting his small town, "What are the people here like? We're thinking of moving to town." The attendant answered with his own question, "What are the folks like where you live now?" The couple in the car



answered, “They’re an ornery bunch, difficult, not very friendly.” The attendant said, “Well, that’s what the folks here are like.” Later in the day, another car pulled into the gas station. The driver asked the same question “What are the people here like? We’re thinking of moving to town.” The attendant answered with the same question, “What are the folks like where you live now?” The couple in the car answered, “They’re a great bunch, kind and friendly.” The attendant said, “Well, that’s what the folks here are like.”

Let me close with one last story. It’s about a man named Larry Trapp. Larry Trapp fancied himself Grand Dragon of the Nebraska Ku Klux Klan. He also named himself head of the state’s Nazi Party. Posters of Adolph Hitler covered the walls of his dark one bedroom apartment in Lincoln. Trapp spent a lot of his time making venom-filled phone calls to blacks, Jews and Asians in town.

A young couple named Michael and Julie Weiser had recently settled in Lincoln, thinking it would be a good place to raise their kids. Julie Weiser remembers the Sunday morning that the first phone call came from Trapp. The caller said to her husband, Michael, “You’re going to be sorry you ever moved to Lincoln, Jew boy.” Two days later the Weisers got a card in the mail that read, “The KKK is watching you, scum.”

Michael Weiser was a deeply religious man. In the midst of the harassment that continued, Weiser, believe it or not, began to return Trapp’s calls... and leave friendly messages on his answering machine. After a few of these calls, Trapp finally picked up the phone and told Weiser to leave him alone. Weiser responded by saying, “I know that you are disabled. Would you like a ride to the grocery store?” After a moment of stunned silence, Trapp answered, “No, but thank you for asking,” and hung up.

Several weeks went by, and then one day, Trapp the Nazi called Weiser the Jew and said he needed to talk. Michael and Julie went right over to his house. They talked for four hours. Trapp admitted that he was desperately lonely and unhappy and then did the most extraordinary thing. He took two swastika rings off his



fingers and gave them to Weiser. He said he didn't want them anymore. In the months that followed, a human transformation took place. Trapp made a public apology to Lincoln's black and Jewish communities. About this time, the Weisers realized that Trapp was dying of diabetes-related illness. They convinced Trapp to move into their house with them. Julie eventually had to quit her job to care of Trapp full-time. A few months later, the former Grand Dragon died. Michael Weiser, who is a cantor, sang at his funeral.

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.