

Sermon for Easter VII Year C 2019  
*Putting It Together*

Though I've never seen Sondheim's *Sundays in the Park with George*, one of my favorite songs from the musical is *Putting It Together*.

This song—which is sung in Act II of the musical, one hundred years after the creation of the painting by George Seurot which also shares the title of the musical, acknowledges how works of art come together . . .

*Bit by bit . . . ounce by ounce . . . note by note . . .*

*Having just a vision's no solution*

*Everything depends on execution*

*Putting it together . . . that's what counts.*

*Small amounts, adding up to make a work of art*

*First you need a good foundation*

*Otherwise it's risky from the start*

*Takes a lot of earnest conversation*

*But without the proper preparation*

*Having just a vision's no solution*

*Everything depends on execution*

*The art of making art, is putting it together . . .*

*Art isn't easy,*

*Every minor detail*

*Is a major decision*

*Have to keep things in scale*

*Have to hold to your vision . . .*

*Bit by bit . . . putting it together –*

This song came to mind as I contemplated this week's texts.

From the intricate and interconnected stories

of Paul “freeing” the slave-girl from her demon

which leads to his and his mission companion's imprisonment.

As Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns in prison,

there is an earthquake which crumbles the walls of Roman prison.

Yet Paul and Silas do not flee.

They remain as prisoners so as not to incur  
the death sentence of the Roman soldier who is their prison guard.  
It seems that in the art of faith . . . in putting together their life by faith,  
they have embraced that the “art of faith” isn’t easy—  
they pay attention to the details—small and large—  
and keep things in scale, holding onto the vision of the kingdom of God  
even in the midst of imprisonment at the hands of the Roman empire.  
Bit by bit . . . they were part of Christ putting his church together.

On the seventh Sunday of Easter each year,  
we always hear a portion of Jesus’ “high priestly prayer”—  
The setting is the upper room on Maundy Thursday  
after Jesus has washed his disciples’ feet,  
after Judas Iscariot has left the building to set in motion his betrayal,  
after he has predicted Peter’s denial,  
after he has issued his new commandment to love,  
after he has promised his disciples the gift of Holy Spirit,  
and is warning them that time is running out.  
In the final moments before his arrest,  
Jesus “looks toward heaven and prays.”  
I have heard some people call this prayer the *other* Lord’s prayer—  
The one we don’t memorize and recite on Sunday mornings.

Which, perhaps, is understandable.  
This prayer is not polished or poetic  
in the way the “Our Father” prayer is.  
It doesn’t flow or cover its bases as efficiently.  
Frankly, it’s rather long, rambling, and rather hard to follow.  
And though the disciples are meant to overhear the words,  
Jesus’ tone has an urgency and passion that is achingly private.  
I think that’s because Jesus isn’t engaging in a teaching moment  
with *this* Lord’s prayer, he’s rending his heart.  
He’s giving us his vision—our unity, our oneness with him and each  
other—but he’s not laying out the details.

And, yet, I think he is laying out the foundation of our unity—

What jumped out at me as I contemplated this prayer is the phrase, “I ask.”

What does it mean that Jesus spends his final moments with his friends in humble, anxious supplication?

Jesus—the One who healed the sick and fed the hungry and raised the dead—

what does it mean that he ends up his ministry by asking, beseeching, really,

for God to do for his disciples what he himself cannot do?

Jesus asks God to be for us in Spirit

what he can no longer be for us in body.

*May they be in us . . . Jesus prays for you and for me.*

*May they all be one . . .*

*May they know the love that founded the world.*

*May they see the glory of God.*

What does Jesus mean by all his talk here about “glory?”

*I have given them the glory that you gave me . . .*

*I want them . . . to see my glory,*

*the glory you have given me because you loved me . . .*

Clearly this is a key theme in John’s gospel throughout.

It began in his opening chapter in that well-known soaring prologue . . .

*. . . and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.*

The striking feature of that prologue is

that John never mentions “glory”

until after he has given the shocking revelation

that the eternal Word of God—

who had been with God in the beginning

and through whom all things had been made—was made flesh.

John did not talk about “glory” in connection to the soaring words

about the beginning of all things,

about the creation,

or about anything that we might regard  
as “heavenly” and eternal in nature.

No glory came onto the scene only after the incarnation is mentioned  
It reminds me of when Paul speaks in his letter to the Philippians  
about the glorification of Christ only after he speaks of Jesus having  
sunk as far down into death and hell as he can go.

Another curious place early in John where glory pops up  
is at the wedding at Cana—which we heard way back during the  
Epiphany season in January this year.

You remember the story—the bridal party did not order enough wine  
for the traditionally lengthy wedding reception.

Although we are told the guests  
had already imbibed quite a bit of wine as it was,  
in order for the celebration to continue, more wine was needed.

So Mary, Jesus’ mother,  
corners him into doing something about the situation.

He does, transforming six huge water jars  
into the finest vintage anyone had ever tasted.

A fine miracle, though, perhaps, not quite earth shattering.

This was his “first sign” in the gospel of John—  
the last such sign will be the raising of Lazarus from the dead.  
Now *that* was quite a miracle in comparison, don’t you think?

And yet, John tells us that at the wedding of Cana,  
his disciples beheld Jesus’ “glory” and they put their faith in him.  
Really?

Glory in a goblet of wine?

Glory in wine created for a people already a bit tipsy?

But, yes, there it is: glory can be ever-so-mundane.

Apparently glory is, as the song *Putting it Together*,  
observes . . . is in every little detail—

the glory of Christ, the glory of God’s reign  
comes together bit by bit, ounce by ounce, note by note.

Here and throughout the gospel of John we discover a wonderfully paradoxical presentation of glory.

Yes, glory can be and is everything we usually associate with the glory of God: glory can be luminous and splendid and mind-boggling—blinding and majestic in ways that unmake us and humble us.

But glory can also come through the grace and truth of the very humble incarnate Lord Jesus.

When Jesus speaks of showing his disciples “his glory”—it is all-but certain that he is not talking about extraordinary spectacles of light and effulgence and mind-bending special effects.

The glory of Jesus emerges in the course of his ministry when he gave hope to the poor,

when he forgave the sins of those bent and broken and marginalized,

when he reached out to his enemies in love,

when he showered grace on the least deserving.

Glory shone earlier on that same evening as he knelt to wash the dirty feet of his disciples.

True, it wasn't the mountain-top Transfiguration experience—but for those with eyes to see,

it was the glory of God's grace and truth shining

in One coming into the world.

*I have set you an example*, Jesus told his disciples.

*You need a good foundation . . .* the song goes,

*Otherwise its risky from the start.*

We hear Jesus pray that he wants his followers to be with him where he is so that they can see the glory the Father has given.

Now, likely most of us tend to picture golden thrones situated on lofty clouds in the heavens above—

the vision we hold is a bit more Revelation-like

or Cecile B. DeMille—than the one Jesus has in mind.

Just consider that Jesus was within minutes

of being arrested, tried, flogged, and crucified.

Is it not likely that Jesus is pointing to the cross itself  
as the place where Jesus' glory would be fully revealed?  
Is it not likely that Jesus is praying  
that his followers will not abandon him  
but will stay with him even at Golgotha  
to see the true measure of divine glory  
in reaching out to and saving a very fallen world?

The glory of God and Christ is not just composed of shiny lights.  
In fact, as one preacher, Debbie Blue put it,  
*God's glory doesn't shine.*  
*It bleeds.*

The glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth,  
is put together not just with light but also with shadows,  
not just with high notes but also with bass notes,  
not just with joy but also with sorrow, pain and suffering.  
*God's glory doesn't shine . . . it bleeds.*  
God's glory is humble and earthy and oh-so-extraordinarily ordinary.

So here is the essence of the good news.  
We don't have to wait for special seasons of blessing  
to see God's glory in Christ.  
We don't need angels' wings or skies split asunder.  
We don't need to be transported out of the routines of our workaday  
lives to be encountered by glory.  
Nor do we need to be lifted out  
of our sufferings, our sorrows, our hardships to see glory.  
In fact, the gospel suggests that those are the very places  
where we can expect to see glory more often than not.  
I suspect that, in part, is what inspired George Seurot's famous  
painting—*Sunday in the Park with George*.

I once read a story told by a surgeon named Richard Selzer.  
Dr. Selzer had to remove a tumor from the cheek of a young woman.

After the surgery, the woman was in bed,  
her mouth post-op was twisted in a palsied, even clownish way.  
A tiny twig of the facial nerve had to be severed in the operation,  
releasing a muscle that led to her mouth.  
Her young husband was in the room along with the surgeon.  
“Will my mouth always be like this?” the woman asked.  
“Yes,” Dr. Selzer replied, “the nerve was cut.”  
The young woman nodded, fell silent, and looked broken.  
But her husband smiled and said, “I like it. It’s kind of cute.”  
And all at once, Dr. Selzer wrote,  
“I knew who this young husband was.”  
The doctor saw Jesus in that husband.  
He saw Jesus in the man’s gentleness and love,  
in his sympathy and compassion.  
Then he saw Jesus afresh as this woman’s husband  
bent down to kiss her crooked mouth,  
carefully twisting his own lips to accommodate her lips,  
showing her that their kiss still worked and always would.

Glory infused that hospital room that day—  
the glory of God’s One and Only who came here,  
humbly accommodating himself to us in our brokenness  
by taking on the very nature of a servant.  
We have seen his glory.  
We still see his glory.  
It is all around us.

We see it here—  
at the communion table  
where Christ’s body is broken and his blood is shed for us.  
But we also see it at the breakfast table.  
We see it in the water at the baptismal font—  
and in the water from the sprinkler that catches the sun’s rays.

We see the glory of the presence of Christ  
and the love of Christ that makes us one  
whenever we see or do justice,  
we see or do the love of kindness,  
and whenever we humbly help God, side by side,  
to *put it all together* in the reconciled diversity  
which is the glory of the cross.