

Life as Haiku Poem

Time after Pentecost – Confirmation Day
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June 8, 2008
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Hosea 5:15-6:6; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As an English major in college, I enjoyed studying a variety of literature: Novels and short stories, essays and plays. I was not, however, particularly fond of poetry. Free verse, especially modern poetry, oft-times seemed unstructured and incomprehensible to me—kind of like the Sheetz coffee commercials currently on TV that feature some beat poet in a dark nightclub waxing eloquently about the convenience store lattes. And while poetry that rhymed was occasionally lovely, some of it could read like a Hallmark Card verse: *And so I send this card your way, all because I want to say, have a very special day.* (Aside to the confirmands: You know you'll be receiving cards today that might sound like that, but they're given to you from people who love you very much. For that reason alone such verse can be appreciated.)

However, some poetry has a structure to hold it together and give it shape, while also allowing great freedom in its interior. For example, there's the sonnet. Did any of you confirmands read sonnets this year in English? William Shakespeare wrote some beautiful ones. Of course, then we'd have to discuss how a sonnet has 14 lines of iambic pentameter with a particular set of rhyming rules. Too difficult. Let's go instead with Haiku.

Haiku is Japanese poetry. Do you know the structure of Haiku? There are three lines in a Haiku poem, and the only rule other than three lines is that the first line has 5 syllables, the second has 7 syllables and the third has five syllables again. That's all—5, 7, 5.

So there's all this wonderful freedom within that simple structure. Now, most Haiku poems are about nature. My youngest daughter was busy this year in 5th grade writing Haiku. Rebecca wrote one that she made into a bookmark for her mother on Mother's Day. Here it is. It reads:

*Sunlight, flowing down.
Dappling the dirty ground
With splotches of gold.*

I think it's lovely. But we could easily come up with one for confirmation class on Sunday mornings in the Youth Group room, right? Something like:

*Couches to sit on
Pastor Easton talks so much.
Soon we fall asleep.*

Yes, with Haiku the possibilities are endless. And my prayer today is that you who have just affirmed your baptism, and everyone else in this room, will see that our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ are much like a Haiku poem. A simple structure to give our lives shape, and then freedom, plenty of freedom within that structure to love God and love God's world.

Religion isn't always like that. Sometimes the rules become barriers to loving service and growing faith. By the time the prophet Hosea was speaking God's word to Israel, as we heard in our first lesson, the people of God were so obsessed about rules, they'd forgotten what faithful lives would look like. They began to think that the very gesture of making proper sacrifices in the temple, the token outward gesture of doing the right things in worship, was ultimately what pleased the Lord God, and what God wanted. No, says Hosea. The Lord God desires not burnt offerings of sacrificial lambs, or baskets full of grain, but love toward God that is steadfast. Not intermittent faithfulness that exists today and is gone tomorrow, but loyalty to God that lasts a lifetime. And that steadfast love, above all, was to be expressed in merciful action toward neighbor. Through Hosea, God says: "*I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice . . .*"

The implication for us is that life in relationship with God has a shape and structure that is faithfulness to God. That's all—it's very simple. Yet within that structure of faithfulness comes freedom, glorious freedom to love and care for the world God has made, all to the praise of God's name. The possibilities of doing just that are endless, like a Haiku poem.

Now look at our Gospel lesson this morning in which Matthew recounts one day in the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus. It was a very interesting, very busy day. Consider all the possibilities here for Jesus to love and care freely for the world his Father made, all the while contained within Jesus' own life structure that was shaped by his faithfulness to his Heavenly Father.

First, while walking along, Jesus saw Matthew, a tax collector (tax collectors not being very popular with the masses, might I add), and Jesus called him into discipleship. That's like the last person in the world you might want sitting beside you in church, and Jesus goes and invites him, saying, "Come on in and sit with us!" And when very proper religious authorities, following their rules, note that same Jesus that same day dines with not only tax collectors but other unsavory folk, Jesus boldly reminds them of Hosea's words, basically disses them by saying, "*Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*" Jesus knew and understood Hosea's prophetic words.

Barely was Jesus done speaking so courageously, showing God's mercy to outcasts, when a leader in the synagogue came to him, absolutely frantic because his daughter had died. He sought Jesus out, begging Jesus to make her live. And immediately, Jesus got up and went with the leader of the synagogue to help, to heal, to bring life. Might not have been on his schedule that day, but Jesus went. Then, on his way there, someone else needed him, just as desperately—a woman who had bled for years, whom no one could seem to help. There she was, reaching out to touch his cloak, believing that even by doing just that, she might be made whole again. Wasn't this just another interruption for Jesus? Didn't Jesus have something more important to do for a far more important person? Yet Jesus did stop to heal her, and then went on his way to that young girl. Not that that was a cakewalk either. People hanging around the leader's home

were already making funeral preparations for the girl. They scoffed at him when Jesus suggested she was only sleeping. But when he went into the house and brought her back out alive, people were simply amazed.

What a day Jesus had! What a difference he made in that little corner of the world! How varied the needs and situations that arose! Yet how faithfully Jesus lived, and how merciful and loving his deeds!

It would be many days later that this same Jesus, in obedience to God the Father, would become the ultimate sacrificial lamb. Jesus would offer not a token outward gesture of sacrifice, but offer all that he was on the cross for you and me. Mercy and forgiveness freely given. And because Jesus did this, gave himself to God the Father and us, **we** have been set free to spend our earthly days like Jesus did, in **our** little corners of the world.

That's what you have to look forward to, all your earthly days. And some days you'll find that you need great courage to do the right thing, to stick up for the most vulnerable, to welcome those who differ from you. Some days you'll find constant interruption, and all of your best-laid plans must be laid aside because some child of God needs you. Some days you'll have to make tough choices, difficult decisions based not on what makes you popular, but based on what our Lord God deeply desires from you. For that is what our Lord Jesus did, and what those who follow him are to do also.

We, your parents and family, your Christian friends, will be here to help you in those earthly days. And remember that every single one of you has been promised in your baptism the very power of God through the Holy Spirit to direct you on your path. What days you will have, serving God and neighbor! What a difference you each can make! How you will be strengthened to live faithfully, and how merciful and loving your deeds can be! Your lives will be like a Haiku poem. The possibilities are endless. Thanks be to God. **AMEN.**