

“HOW MUCH CAN WE MAKE OUT OF WHAT WE HAVE?”

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You might have heard the story of Itzhak Perlman’s trial-by-fire concert at Lincoln Center back in 1995. If you’ve ever seen this violin virtuoso, you know that even getting on stage is no small feat for this artist disabled by childhood polio. With crutches and braces, he walks slowly, painfully, yet somehow majestically. Then Perlman sits down, methodically unclasps himself, stores his hardware, arranges his feet, takes up his violin, and then finally nods to the conductor. His audiences know his ritual and remain reverently silent as he moves, organizes and settles in.

So during this concert 21 years ago, as Perlman initiated the first few bars of the symphony, something went wrong. A string on his violin broke. It shot out suddenly like a rifle through that large hall. Everyone assumed he would get up, put on his clasps, pick up the crutches, and shuffle off for another violin or string. But Perlman didn’t. No, instead, he paused, closed his eyes and was still. He invited the conductor to begin again. Of course, we know it is impossible to play a symphonic work on three strings. We all know it. Except someone forgot to tell Itzhak.

He intrepidly forged ahead. The orchestra began, and he played as though on a mission. As Perlman played, he was adapting, modulating, and transposing the piece inside his head. At one point, he detuned the strings for sounds they had never made before. He played with such passion, power, and purity as people familiar around him had never heard. Upon finishing, at first an awesome silence enveloped the room. Then an immense outburst of applause erupted. Clearly this was a man well-versed with facing disadvantage and disability on every front.

Perlman smiled, wiped the sweat from his brow, and raised his bow to quiet the jubilant response. He spoke softly, “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music he can still make with what he has left.” It’s true, isn’t it?

I don’t know if the ministry of the church can be artistic or not. Probably, at our best ministry is art, craft, science and passionate trust in God. But I do know this. Across September, when we haven’t enjoyed the familiar comforts of worshiping in that Meetinghouse--which is our spiritual home—we’ve had a more ambitious September than any since I became your senior minister. Sometimes the art of being Christian is finding out how much good we can do out of what we have left. Closing out the month of September Sundays, they’ve been good, but not easy.

Before a Harvest Moon dinner over two weeks ago, I chatted with the chef of the Tokeneke Club. Have times gone well for you lately, Justin? I asked. With that club under construction, he carefully chose his words. It has been ‘interesting’, he said. I called him on his euphemism. It’s the same where I work. It feels like we’re doing work at FCC with one arm tied behind our back. We both smiled knowingly.

This isn't to complain, whine or self-pity. It's about God's genius for bringing good out of trials and tribulations. The heart of our faith burns purposefully like a diesel engine: the heavier the load, the hotter it gets, the more efficiently it pulls, the better it works, bringing out the best in us. But my, the pressure of those loads!

Now we're ready to hear our verse, I Peter 3:15. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." This is amazing because it is normally when we are down and disheartened that we feel led to craft elaborate defenses explaining why our life is falling apart. As hardship visits us, we itemize the reasons why we lament. We justify and rationalize being down, as though to say, it's for a good reason, it will pass, and no, it's not contagious. So you can be around me, although I am not so cheerful.

But I Peter says the opposite. He goes counterintuitive. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the *hope* that is in you. Life's a deep struggle, yes, but it's a joyous struggle. In spiritual warfare as you're tested, be happy warriors. Trust God's revelation that things end well. Receive the circumstantial setbacks as an opportunity to contrast the light of God amid the darkness of your situation. Radiate the light of knowing God finally wins. Don't prepare defenses for being down, but for staying hopeful in spite of everything. It'll confuse most people, amaze the rest, and show forth the glory of God.

Dante observed, "So tell me of your faith, I have doubts enough of my own." As God's people, staying positive in the face of adversity, we must prepare the case before onlookers for why hope shines in our faces when it shouldn't. Why life is at bottom a mystery of infinite goodness. Why God's truth sets us free. Be prepared to give account for hope, not despair. Maybe Peter says that because hope is so rare in the world, because it's precious, because it points back to God.

We are at a halfway mark. We have gone four months without our Meetinghouse and expect another four months before returning there. In my experience of the spiritual exile of worshiping away from the holy place that's our spiritual epicenter, around six months is when people get real discouraged. Let us fortify ourselves against that now, recognizing the resilience we've shown, realizing the vitality showing forth in our ministry, keeping our eyes on the prize. Sometimes the art of being Christian is finding out how much good we can do out of what we have left. And friends, despite the big room being inaccessible, we're now so very blessed.

When I shared with my pastor friends our situation of not being able to enter that Meetinghouse space which is more "church" than any other space we know here, one responded, "It really is a gift God is giving you." I winced, wrinkling my brow. "What do you mean by that?" He said, "Well, Darien is lovely, and that church is a gem." "Yeah, I said, so?" "So it's all too tempting to be a people of those lovely trappings—including that building—rather than becoming the people of God. After outlasting this, you'll know yourselves anew and afresh as people of God." He wasn't being rude or calloused. He was inviting us to become happy warriors.

Ultimately, I remember back in college reading *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. The book compared life's discouraging drudgery and pointlessness with the ancient Greek myth of the man rolling a boulder up a mountain, only to find it rolling back down, with this process repeating ad infinitum, that being our lifetime. Really, there's a lot of truth in that searingly honest vision, cast in shades of grey. For that's how things strike me as God's hope in Christ is removed from my days.

But now, I don't see Camus' boulder. I see the boulder Matthew describes as the resurrection of Jesus unfolds. The boulder ordered there to seal Jesus' grave. The boulder lodged against a hole in the ground forever meant to seal off hope. That boulder angels swung open like a rusty-hinged gate to declare that joy wins.

Know how glad I am to be your pastor, even in this time of rolling up our sleeves. For me, right now, our spiritual home shines brighter than ever. And what is the light I see by? The light of God's people doing the most good we can out of what we have. And trusting God to restore us and take us to new heights. This is what it means to be the people of God, transcending any place and every moment. Keep the faith, my friends. And let your light so shine that it gives glory to God. Amen.