

Worked to the Bone

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Ezekiel 37:1-14

Max DePree, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Herman Miller company –tells the story about his father who founded the company back in the early part of last century. Back in those days – the 1920’s – furniture factories were not run by electric motors, but by a shaft and pulley system fed by a steam engine. It was a rather complicated system of boilers and straps and cylinders and steam and the whole cycle was overseen by a person called a millwright. The millwright was responsible for making sure this cycle of shafts and pulleys and steam was always working ... so that the woodworkers could keep applying their trade.

One day the millwright died. And DePree recounts that his father when hearing the news that the millwright died decided that the right thing to do was to go to the millwright’s house and pay his respects to the family. When he arrived at the rather humble abode of the millwright – his wife invited him in and to have a seat in the living room. There was some awkward conversation and some even more awkward silence until finally the millwright’s wife asked if it would be all right to read some poetry. Mr. DePree consented. So the woman went into another room and brought out a bound book of poetry and began to read. It was beautiful poetry and when the woman finished reading it Mr. DePree asked who wrote it. She replied that her husband, the millwright, was the poet.

Upon later leaving the house Mr. DePree began to wonder about something – this employee whose job it was to oversee this mechanical puzzle of shafts and pulleys and who was very skilled at it had another thing going on inside him – another passion, another gift. He wrote poetry ... and he wrote very good poetry. And it led Mr. DePree to a question that would forever change the way he looked at every employee he had – and the question about the millwright was this:

“Was he a poet who did millwright’s work, or was he a millwright who wrote poetry?”

Life does have its way of funneling you and me into a particular work or a particular role. We make our choices along the way as to what we are going to “do” for a living ... or what we are going to “be” when we grow up – but those choices we make don’t always paint the whole picture. There is more to you than what meets the eye, isn’t there? Is it fair to say that you are or were just simply a business executive, or simply a salesman, or simply an accountant, or simply a stay at home mom, or simply a teacher, or simply retired, or simply a millwright? The truth is ... you are not just simply anything. We are not defined – or we should not allow ourselves to be defined – by the life choices we have made in the past. Was the man a poet who did millwright’s work, or a millwright who wrote poetry? Truth is ... you and I are deep and complicated human beings who have been fearfully and wonderfully made by a Creator whose design for us we are learning about every day.

Nevertheless, we live in a world that has its way of working us to the bone. And when I say “working us to the bone” I don’t just mean working us long hours, though that may sometimes be the case. No, the world has its way of working us to the bone – by somehow working out of us the spirit that is inside us. Working us, working us over, so that the only thing left is the bones and not the spirit. And we can get worked to the bone in all sorts of ways. Sometimes it is, in fact, our jobs that work us to the bone. We take on a work that does not necessarily give us joy, but pays the bills. We work and work against our spirit until finally our spirit departs. Sometimes it is just life that works us to the bone. Unfortunate circumstances occur that make living more and more difficult. Job loss, marital strife, depression, betrayal, an unexpected accident, a surprising diagnosis – and we grind and we grind and suddenly one day we feel no more spirit. All bones, no spirit. Sometimes it’s just not being honest with ourselves that works us to the bone. We live our lives the way everyone else wants us to live – instead of how we might be called and created to live. We put on a good front until one day we look inside and see nothing.

“You see, the message from the beginning to the end of the Bible is that God is always trying to let us be who we are.”

Boris Pasternak, author of *Dr. Zhivago*, put it this way: “The great majority of us are required to live a life of constant, systematic duplicity. Your health is bound to be affected if, day after day, you say the opposite of what you feel, if you grovel before what you dislike and rejoice at what brings you nothing but misfortune. (Our spirits) cannot be forever violated with impunity.”

The world sometimes has its way of working us to the bone.

Add on top of this the widespread notion in our culture certainly outside the church, but sometimes inside the church – that believes that the purpose of God – the presence of God – the mission of God – is to try to get us to do something that we’re not wired to do. To get us to be the person we never created to be. That God is like some kind of drill sergeant who is there to bark orders at us and whip us into shape and conform us into some kind of robotic followers. It doesn’t matter who you are or how you were made – God is around to mold you into some uniform figurine for his playset. And so in turn religion becomes for a lot of people this dry sort of ritual that manages again to suck out of us whatever spirit there might be inside. That even the creator works us to the bone. And so on Sunday morning what you get is a lot of people bone tired from the week – bone tired from working against their very grain – bracing themselves for the drill sergeant who is here to tell them that they are not measuring up! And what’s left is all bones, no spirit.

Enter then the message of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is speaking to the discouraged and depleted people of Israel

who have been left to suffer under a foreign captivity. History has worked them over and the spirit of Israel has departed and along with it any hope they might have for a future. And Ezekiel has this vision of a valley of dry bones – a valley of a people who had been worked over and worked to the bone. People who have had life go all against them. And in this vision Ezekiel hears the voice of God who tells him to prophesy to the bones. Tell the bones that I will cause breath to enter into them – and they shall live again. I will lay sinews and flesh upon them – and will breath my spirit into them and they will come alive and they will be what they were intended to be.

You see, the message from the beginning to the end of the Bible is that God is always trying to let us be who we are. And who we are is both bone and spirit. Flesh and soul. And the spirit inside us is this Spirit of God breathed into us to bring to life the unique spirit inside us. This unique spirit that often times the world wants to suck out of us.

You see that’s the crazy thing about how people view religion – that to be religious is to join some sort of chain gang where we get dragged along by a God who has conscripted us into some kind of involuntary servitude. In fact it’s the other way around. Jesus says, I have come to set the captives free. I have come to blow upon the dry bones the spirit of God. I have come to give you permission to be yourself.

Studs Terkel who wrote years ago the seminal book on the nature of work in America said this: “Most people have jobs that are too small for their spirits.” Expand that to say, most people have lifestyles that are too

small for their spirits. Most people have made choices that are too small for their spirits. Most people have circumstances that are too small for their spirits. Most people have gotten themselves worked to the bone – and they wonder can these bones live? Can these bones live?

And maybe that's why we love Christmas so much. Because the little baby born in Bethlehem is born to a people who have gotten worked over. Mary and Joseph forced to leave their home and have their first born in a manger. Enough to knock the spirit right out of you. The people of Palestine living under the rule of Rome --- the despotic kingdom of Herod. Worshipping in a temple built by a heathen. Enough to knock the spirit right out of you. But then there's this little itty bitty baby born whose come to tell us that life is more than circumstance, life is more than situation, life is more than choices you've made, life is more than the job you punch in for – life is Spirit. You can't hold a baby and not know that life is Spirit. And he's come to claim our spirits. He's come to set free our spirits. He's come to bring to life our spirits.

So no surprise that in his ministry Jesus felt drawn to talk to people like the tax collectors, and the prostitutes, and the marginalized and even to the empty rich you know all those people who've got lots of stuff but no spirit. They come to Jesus and they say – Jesus, we're all bones. Life has worked us to the bone. We've gone against the very grain of who we are. There's this empty rattle inside us. And Jesus says, Follow me. Let me unlock the prison and follow me. Because where Jesus takes us is back to ourselves. Back to where it all began – and it all began with spirit. We were spirit before we were anything else. And we will be spirit after everything else. And while life has its way of hemming us in and squeezing us into a job description and labeling us and defining us and giving us titles we don't really like – Jesus leads us into this adventure of living out the great mission of human existence – loving the world and all that is in it. And finding the joy of doing and being what we were created to do and to be!

Bea Salazar slipped a disc. The old body just wasn't what it used to be and she slipped a disc. So she

had back surgery and was sent home to recuperate. She was put on disability at work and she stayed at home. And she grew discouraged and maybe a little depressed over this situation in her life. She felt a little sorry for herself. She was bones more than spirit.

One day when she stepped outside for some fresh air she looked over to the apartment complex dumpster and there was a young boy scavenging for food. Bea went to him and told him that if he wanted some food she could make him a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. Which she did. She took him and fed him a PBJ. When he was done she sent the young boy home. Fifteen minutes later a knock came to the door. She opened it and found six more young boys on her doorstep. "Is it true," one of the boys asked, "that you are giving away peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches?" "Sure," she said. And as she fed them she found out that no one was home at any of these boys houses because all of their parents worked and that because it was summer they had nowhere to go and no way to get lunch. The next day more kids showed up. The next day more kids. She felt like she was feeding the neighborhood. When school began now the kids were coming over to ask for help with homework. Bea saw that this could be something big. So she asked for volunteers from her church and the community. She got resources from the schools. She got her landlord to give her an apartment where she could set up shop for these children. 100 kids come now every day to visit Bea and her ministry. "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Frederick Buechner said that our vocation in life is found where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

They used to say that when Lou Gehrig, the great first baseman for the New York Yankees, would come home from playing one of his 2130 straight baseball games for the Yankees – he would often drop his stuff off at his house and join the neighborhood boys on the street to play stickball. Imagine that – playing stickball with Lou Gehrig. Deep down just a boy wanting to play baseball. And maybe that's why when he was diagnosed with what would come to be known as Lou Gehrig's disease forcing him to retire – he would

stand before a standing room only crowd at Yankee Stadium and says, "I am the luckiest man on the face of the earth."

And don't you wonder if that isn't God's hope for us all – that somehow each of us would get to the end of it and say, "I am the luckiest man (woman) on the face of the earth." Not because it all went just as planned, or that it all was a bed of roses, or that we even found the perfect job – but that somewhere along the way we found ourselves, we found our spirits, we found our calling in life ... that place between millwright and poet. Where the world's deep hunger and our deep gladness meet.

And maybe that starts in Bethlehem – where the world's deep hunger and God's deep gladness meet in that little child – who will someday walk the dusty trails of Palestine, the paved avenues of Sarasota – and say, "Follow me and let those bones live!"



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Church of the Palms

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