

Filling In the Blank

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Mark 12:13-17

If I were to ask you what the most performed musical in the history of American musical theater is I can only imagine what you might guess – you might guess shows like Phantom of the Opera, or CATS, or Les Miserable, or Cabaret or Oliver or 42nd Street, or a host of other Broadway productions. And with some of those you would come close. But actually the most performed musical in the history of musicals in America is a musical revue entitled, *The Wonderful World of Chemistry*. *The Wonderful World of Chemistry* was performed at the New York's World Fair in 1964. It was sponsored by the DuPont Chemical Company and it was performed by several casts on average 40 times a day on two stages inside the DuPont exhibit throughout the months of the New York World's Fair. Likely, as a 6 year old, I saw it, when I attended the World's Fair. I don't remember. I do remember the Disney exhibit because it was *It's a Small World* – which captivated my six year old mind in a way that chemistry just couldn't. Which explains 14 years later my C+ in high school chemistry.

The composer and writer of *The Wonderful World of Chemistry* was a man named Michael Brown. Michael Brown had made for himself a little niche in what was then called “Industrial Musicals” – in other words he wrote music for companies. And this was one such example.

Michael and his wife Joy lived in New York City and had two sons and kind of an adopted daughter. They had taken under their wing a young southern girl

who had moved to New York City from Alabama and was trying her hand at writing. She didn't have two nickels to rub together and was paying the rent for her cold water apartment across town by working as a ticket agent at British Airways. Her writing desk was a plank of wood cut out from a door. The most she could claim for her writing was a couple of magazine articles. She dreamed someday of writing a novel. The Christmas following the 17,000 performances of *The Wonderful World of Chemistry*, the Browns had the young writer over for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and inspired by the windfall that came with the success of the show they gave the young writer a gift – it came in the form of a note in an envelope sitting on the Christmas tree. And the note said, ““You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas.” They had decided to pay the young writer's expenses for a year so she could quit her job and give herself the chance to achieve her dream – writing a novel. Given that chance she wrote. And she finished her novel. The writer's name was Harper Lee and the novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

It's impossible to know what went on in the mind of Michael and Joy Brown when it came to deciding what to give the young, unproven, struggling writer for Christmas. But it doesn't take much to imagine that on the wings of success – albeit through *The Wonderful World of Chemistry* – they had maybe looked back and seen the road that had led them to that point. And that somewhere along that road the person or persons who had given them a chance. Given them a chance. A break. And sometimes a chance is as much as a person needs. And it doesn't take much to imagine the young couple with two young kids, somewhat giddy with joy to think that they had the chance to give someone else the same kind of opportunity. It's amazing to think what people can come up with when they think back to what they've

been given. And it's amazing to think what might happen when you give someone a chance.

Our five verses this morning tell us of a little exchange that Jesus has with some of the religious leaders of his day. They have brought to him a question about taxes and in particular they are wanting to know if a good Jew should pay taxes to a heathen government. Caesar has imposed upon Palestine a heavy tax burden and they want to know what position Jesus takes on taxation. Should a good Jew pay taxes? At least that's the surface question. But the truth is, as Mark tells us, they're just trying to trip Jesus up. They're throwing him a question to see if they can catch him saying the wrong thing. One of those gotcha questions. You got to watch out for those gotcha questions – because usually they are a misdirect from the real issue. The issue is over here, but if I ask a gotcha question – then it means I don't have to worry about the issue over here, because I gotcha over here. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?

And for Jesus the issue over here has to do with rendering. That's that old King James word – Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's. It's about rendering. Jesus has asked about the rendering on the coin –

the rendering of Caesar – and so he cleverly says, “You know the issue really is about rendering – so render unto Caesar those things that have Caesar's rendering – and unto God those things that bear the rendering of God. In other words you have to give to Caesar what you have to give to Caesar – but then there is this big question you also get to answer – (the one maybe you don't want to answer) - and that is what rendering do you want to make of God in the world? What imprint do you want to make of God in the world? And like Jesus often does – he puts the question back into their laps and our laps and says, “Have yourself some fun figuring it out.” Caesar will tell you what you have to pay. By April 15 we will be told what to pay --- but God isn't going to tell you what to pay – he is going to leave you to have the fun figuring it out. He leaves the canvas empty for you and me to figure out.

He leaves the rendering to us. Be creative he says. Let your mind and heart take over and render unto God the things that our God's.

Jesus does this over and over again – he leaves us to fill in the blank. When he tells the lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan and asks, “Who proved neighbor to the beaten man?” And the lawyer says,

“It's amazing to think what people can come up with when they think back to what they've been given. And it's amazing to think what might happen when you give someone a chance.”

“The Samaritan.” Jesus says, “Go and do likewise.” He leaves it up to the man to figure it out. Come up with your own rendering.

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and wants to know the secret to life and Jesus says you must be born of the Spirit – he leaves it to the old man to figure it out, come up with his own rendering.

When the disciples are huddled with Jesus before his ascension and they want to know what’s next – Jesus tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit and then they will figure it out. They will come up with their own rendering.

Jesus, you see, does us the favor of not telling us what to do with our lives and with our gifts – he does not tell us what to draw – he doesn’t give us a paint by numbers set – Jesus gives us this pallet and says, Let your life be a rendering. Fill the canvas with what you think bears the image of God.

This is our greatest joy, isn’t it? When we get the blank canvas and God says, Paint me a picture. Now what we are tempted to say – like those religious leaders of long ago – is well you know I have the government to pay – I have the mortgage to pay – I have the club dues to pay – I have the retirement fund to pay – I have the college bill to pay – I have the pharmacy bill to pay – and Jesus, because he loves us, says – “Yeah, that’s true but it also sounds like a misdirect. You may be missing the point. Because the joy comes in the rendering God gives us the freedom to make?”

Can you imagine the joy that filled that young couple’s souls when they came up with that crazy idea of paying a young woman’s salary so she could have a shot at putting her imprint on the world? And then to see what became of their risky rendering? They didn’t know that Atticus Finch was in the making? A Pulitzer Prize was in the offing? It wasn’t the point – the

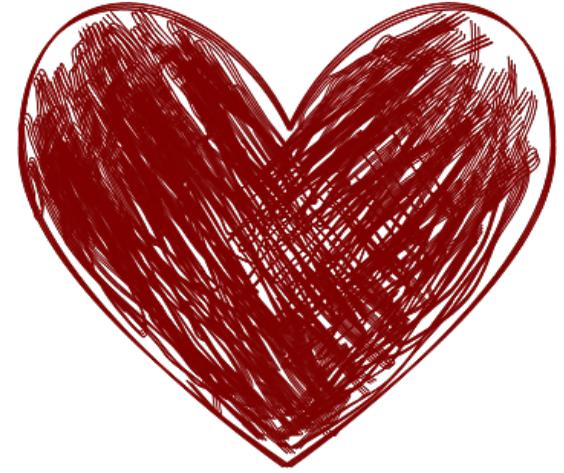
point was in the wondering what fun we might allow ourselves if we gave this young writer a chance?

When I write my check out to support the work of Samaritan Counseling – the counseling center housed on our campus – I don’t know what the result of that is going to be? It’s this chance I’m taking – to give someone else a chance. Or when I write a check out to the Food Pantry – God didn’t tell me I had to do that – that wouldn’t be any fun. But to wonder with empty canvas what rendering I might make of God to someone who needs some food for the end of the week – that’s where the fun is. Or when I make a check out to Church of the Palms and I wander around and see middle school kids running around the courtyard and elementary kids getting tutored and grieving persons being cared for and preschool kids being taught and musicians singing and playing to the glory of God – I really don’t know what the end result will be – ah but to think of what rendering of God might be seen and what chance might be given?

Two years after taking me to the World’s Fair my daddy got called to pastor a new congregation up in suburban Detroit. And so at age 8 I remember driving up to our new home which was right across the street from what would be our new church – and from our house I could see this not yet completed building the congregation was building – a new Sunday School and youth wing. It was where I would be going to Sunday School; it was where I would be taught by Miss Hiatt and Mrs. Ward and Mr. Millhouse. It’s where I would go to youth fellowship and get my life changed by the love and grace of youth directors like Jo Stone, Denny Davenport and Bob Keller and Gary McIlroy. It’s where the seeds of my call to ministry would get planted. Inside that building. And it didn’t dawn on me for a long time what had happened. And what had happened was that a group of Presbyterians not

knowing me of course because I hadn’t arrived. But they had dreamed that some eight year old might wander by and need a chance to learn about God – to hear the stories of Jesus – and to respond to his grace. Might someone like me need that kind of chance? And so with empty canvas – they wondered what rendering might they make of God? What fun could they be about in creating space for someone like me to discover God? How could they have known that that little 8 year old, for better or for worse, would imagine inside those walls that he was being called to ministry? They couldn’t know. They couldn’t have. But they imagined enough to start the rendering. To take the chance that someone else may have a chance. And in giving that chance – building that building - how could they have known that it wouldn’t be just one young man who received his call to ministry from within those walls – but that there would be twelve of us. Twelve!! Twelve of us who gave our lives to ministry and mission in the four corners of the world. Oh what fun!

Are you having fun with your rendering? Are you having fun in thinking to whom you might be giving a chance?



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Church of the Palms

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