

Chapel Talk
Mark Hammond
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Good evening.

I have to tell you about the first St. Andrew's chapel talk I ever witnessed. It was on the day I interviewed here almost two years ago. In that talk, Mr. Speers spoke of the humiliation of wetting himself in public. I'm afraid I can't match that, so... you'd better just hope this is short.

Yesterday was Epiphany. From the reading tonight, it should be clear that Epiphany celebrates the divine manifestation of Jesus Christ through the visit of the wise men, who were led to Jesus by a star. A quick quiz on the reading we just heard: how many wise men were there? Three? The Bible doesn't specify the number of wise men. The number three and their names (Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar) have been added to the story over the years. Likewise, many people have tried to explain the Star of Bethlehem. What was it? A comet? A supernova? A combination of stars and planets? For me, the star in this story symbolizes hope. The wise men followed that star to Jesus out of a sense of hope for mankind. I'm reminded of a Steve Earle song where Earle sings;

It's an elaborate tale,
So convincingly real,
Things that seem so amazing,
'til you get up close and see they're no big deal.

Like the star in the sky,
Or the one on the stage,
Just a big ball of gas,
Or a regular guy fresh out of minimum wage.

I'm going to resist hypothesizing an explanation for the Star of Bethlehem. That might make it no big deal for me. Instead I'd like to talk tonight about the other kind of star mentioned in Steve Earle's song: the one on the stage. Last year, Mr. Jenkins gave a

chapel talk in which he quoted some words that Bob Dylan wrote about Woody Guthrie. After that talk I conducted an unscientific survey of students. All of you knew Bob Dylan, but no one that I asked knew about Woody Guthrie. Woody Guthrie is the star I want to talk about tonight. His songs and his life give me hope, even though he truly was just a regular guy... but when he started out there was no such thing as a minimum wage.

So, who was Woody Guthrie? He grew up the son of a cowboy... poor, rural, a hillbilly... a redneck. He's generally labeled a folksinger, a writer of uniquely American music that took as its sources blues, gospel, bluegrass and traditional melodies. He has been called the first singer-songwriter, and every singer-songwriter worth his or her salt will admit to the great debt they owe Woody Guthrie. He has influenced Steve Earle, Bob Dylan, Lucinda Williams, Dar Williams, John Prine, Steve Goodman, Sheryl Crowe, Ramblin' Jack Elliot, Merl Haggard, Ani DiFranco, Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Michelle Shocked, Kris Kristofferson, Nanci Griffith, John Haibt, Janis Joplin, Townes Van Zandt, Robert Earl Keen, Jerry Jeff Walker, Ray Wiley Hubbard, Michael Martin Murphy, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and those are just a few that jump to mind immediately. During the 1930's Woody Guthrie chronicled the trials and tribulations of Midwesterners trying to leave the Dust Bowl and find a better life in the West. He himself traveled by freight train, by foot, by hitchhiking, across the country, experiencing along the way scorn and hatred from his fellow citizens, who rejected their own countrymen looking to escape the environmental and economic disaster of the Dust Bowl. He was devoted to the causes of freedom and liberty, touring labor rallies with blues singers and folksingers. During the 30's, while much of the American public was ambivalent in its attitude toward Hitler (and many American corporations were outright enthusiastic about doing business with fascist governments), Woody Guthrie performed with a sign on his guitar that read, "This machine kills Fascists". While Guthrie never used his guitar to hurt or kill anyone, he did serve in the Merchant Marine and the Army during World War II. And he wrote songs to give hope and support to those whose lives were being turned upside down by hurtful people who supposed that they were better than others... people that sought to protect and expand their entitlement at the expense of the less powerful. So while he saw plenty of evil in European Fascism, he also saw it right here at home, in the country that

he loved. You probably know by heart some of the words to Woody Guthrie's most famous song, "This Land is Your Land." The song reflects Woody's great love for the United States of America. And the song puts into very simple words the egalitarian dream of our country.

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York Island,
From the Redwood Forest, to the Gulf Stream waters,
This land was made for you and me.

As I went walking that Ribbon of highway
And saw above me that endless skyway,
And saw below me that golden valley, I said:
This land was made for you and me.

So I imagine that many of you know these words. A funny story about this song comes to mind here. When Woody was becoming increasingly disabled by Huntington's Chorea, a genetic disease that progressively destroys the nervous system during middle age, he moved his family to New York City where he could receive proper medical care. Some well-to-do admirers of Guthrie's art paid for his children to attend a private school in Manhattan. The school was very liberal, maybe even leftist, and as such, in lieu of "The National Anthem", they sang "This Land is Your Land" every morning before classes started. On the first day that the Guthrie children went to their new school, they were taken aback by the kindness of their new classmates, who had apparently chosen to sing one of their father's songs in order to welcome them. Not only were they amazed when told that this song was a regular part of the school's morning ritual, they were embarrassed to admit that they didn't know the words!

Maybe you can't recite the words to the next two verses, but I bet you will recognize them:

I roamed and rambled and followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts,
And all around me, a voice was sounding:
This land was made for you and me.

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
In wheat fields waving and dust clouds rolling;
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting:
This land was made for you and me.

This is where the song usually ends when sung today. It is not where the song ended when Woody Guthrie wrote it. Woody wrote “This Land is Your Land” because he was tired of hearing Kate Smith’s version of “God Bless America” on the radio. In fact, “This Land is Your Land” was originally titled “God Blessed America” and the chorus used “God blessed America for me” in the place of “This land was made for you and me.” He thought “God Bless America” didn’t reflect the true American vision. It was heavy-handed patriotism and maybe just a little presumptuous. Even today, I believe that “This Land is Your Land” is far superior in setting the proper balance between pride of country and humility before all of God’s creation. Yet, as I keep hinting, there is more to the song.

Was a high wall there that tried to stop me,
A sign was painted said: Private Property,
But on the back side it didn’t say nothing—
This land was made for you and me.

I get a real kick out of this verse. I can just see some crusty Okie coming upon such a sign, ripping it from the wall and checking the backside. “It don’t say nothin’, guess I’ll keep agoin’.” Another way to interpret this verse is that the person who posted the sign (or had it posted at his command) didn’t think enough of the common property outside of his coveted private property to even give it a label. Guthrie was a champion and protector of the commons... those areas of our society, whether actual land or social space, that are open to all. Without commons, we have effectively no freedom of speech, freedom of thought, or freedom of religion. For Woody Guthrie, it is the commons that make America unique and worth defending and loving. Guthrie would have loved the Internet... “Download This” might be his latest album’s name. Written at the bottom of one of Guthrie’s songs where the copyright warning usually goes was the following: “This song is Copyrighted in the U.S., under Seal of Copyright #154085, for a period of

28 years, and anybody caught singin it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ourn, cause we don't give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that's all we wanted to do." Guthrie wasn't attached to his music... he didn't need to own it... and my guess is that, because of this lack of attachment, he was, in a profound way, a happy man.

Now for the last verse:

One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple
By the Relief Office I saw my people -
As they stood hungry, I stood there wondering if
This land was made for you and me.

There, right in front of the church that you might think would help the poor, are hungry people waiting for help that isn't forthcoming. Perhaps these last two verses are usually omitted because they are not as hopeful as the first four. Guthrie questions whether his assumption... that this land was made for all of us... is actually so. At least he is pointing out that there are some who enjoy our freedom and democracy, yet feel no compunction to protect or defend the system that gave them what they have. So clearly pointing out such hypocrisy could get a guy crucified, if you know what I mean. So is "This Land is Your Land" a radical song? You bet it is... and our whole concept of country, society, compassion and equality is radical as well. Radical enough that it is under constant attack by those who would rather not work for what they have... those who are threatened by immigrants and minorities and women who just want to carve out decent lives for themselves.

Guthrie was way out in front when it came to women's rights and racial harmony. He addressed both of these issues in a song that he wrote in the late forties. Interestingly, the music written for this song has not survived. Only the words of much of what Guthrie wrote when he was living in Brooklyn is all that we have. The following song, along with many others was set to new music by the British socialist rocker Billy Bragg and his band Wilco at the request of Guthrie's daughter. I recommend these two CD's for your collection. When listening to these words, don't turn your brain off when you hear

something that you think is offensive... it is important to hear the whole thing in order to understand the message.

Ten hundred books could I write you about her
Because I felt if I could know her
I would know all women
And they've not been any too well known
For brains and planning and organized thinking
But I'm sure that the women are equal
And they may be ahead of the men.

Yet I wouldn't spread such a rumor around
Because one organizes the other
And some times the most lost and wasted
Attract the most balanced and sane
And the wild and the reckless take up
With the clocked and the timed
And the mixture is all of us and we're still mixing.

And all creeds and kinds and colors of us are blending
Till I suppose ten million years from now
We'll all be just the same.
Same color, same size, working together
And maybe we'll have all of the fascists out of the way by then.
Maybe so.

You might think that the timeline for racial harmony is a bit long... or maybe it is realistic. Maybe being all the same color and size is un-PC these days. Whatever you think, the song still inspires me to do something about racism. I don't want to be the reason that it takes twenty million years instead of ten. The song also promotes tolerance of all different kinds, since the "lost and wasted" need and are needed by "the most balanced and sane". All these value judgments about people just point out that we all have these different characteristics to one degree or another... "the mixture is all of us".

Woody also pointed out the obvious ways that our economic system exploits those that are least able to stick up for themselves. The next song, "Deportees: Plane Crash at Los Gatos Canyon" criticized the way large farms produce our food. Unfortunately, not

much has changed since Guthrie wrote this as a poem sometime in the 1940's. Before I start, you should know that even back in the 40's the government paid farmers to destroy their crops in order to keep supply short and prices high. The song refers to oranges in creosote dumps, a method of rendering the fruit inedible. Meanwhile people then, as they do today, go hungry. And even though crop prices are kept artificially high, the workers who harvest the food are denied a living wage.

The crops are all in and the peaches are rotn'ning,
The oranges piled in their creosote dumps,
They're flying 'em back to the Mexican border,
To pay all their money to wade back again.

My father's own father, he waded that river,
They took all the money he made in his life;
My brothers and sisters come working the fruit trees,
And they rode the truck till they took down and died.

Some of us are illegal, and some are not wanted,
Our work contract's out and we have to move on;
Six hundred miles to that Mexican border,
They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves.

The sky plane caught fire over Los Gatos Canyon,
A fireball of lightning, and shook all our hills,
Who are all the friends, all scattered like dry leaves?
The radio says, "They are just deportees".

Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?
Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?
To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil
And be called by no name except "deportees"?

Goodbye my Juan, goodbye Rosalita,
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria.
You won't have a name when you fly the big airplane,
All they will call you will be "deportees".

Guthrie doesn't blame the illegal immigrants. He doesn't blame the farmers. He's not laying blame. He is pointing out an ethical problem and he demands we pay attention. The hard questions are addressed to "us". All of us. Does the situation represent the best that we can do? Is denying the humanity of workers the price we want to pay for putting

food on the table? Another Guthrie song, a humorous send up of a campaign jingle called “Christ for President”, includes the verse:

Every year we waste enough
To feed the ones who starve
We build our civilization up
And we shoot it down with wars.

This goes way beyond saying “Cain’t we just get along.” This verse makes us think about how we live and how our lives, and our lifestyles, affect others. How compassionate is it to have more than we need while others want for the essentials?

I guess one reason that I find Woody Guthrie so inspiring is that he can elicit so many questions and so much thought while doing a darn good job of being entertaining. Not all of Guthrie’s songs are activist in nature. Some are songs for children. Some are about love. There is one about stars over California and another about the Columbia River. Some are religious. One of my favorites is called “This Morning I Was Born Again,” and you can find it on Slaid Cleves record “Broke Down”. That’s another one for your CD collection, if you like great songwriting.

I hope that these few verses from Woody Guthrie give you at least a little insight into what the best American songwriter has to offer. I find hope and inspiration in these words. And in the idea that a country boy, a vagabond and drifter, can capture what our society stands for using the medium of song. Woody Guthrie is a star of hope. And a wise man.