

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL KOTTKE  
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**Sunday, June 29, 2008**

**Title: Reflections on Poetry: Songs of Innocence by William Blake**

**Scripture:** Psalm 100

**Poems:** First poem entitled *Introduction* from “Songs of Innocence”

The last two Sundays I have drawn poems from a book entitled *Love Poems from God*. Beginning today through the remainder of this sermon series, I will be drawing poems from a book entitled, *Leading from Within, Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead* [Edited by Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner, Jossey-Bass, 2007]. The poems in this book have been selected by participants in the Courage to Lead retreats. The participants of these retreats each in his or her own way are making significant contributions to the public culture. The way the book is set up is that on the right-hand page there is the poem selected by the participant, and on the left-hand page is a description from this individual as to why this poem is meaningful to him or her.

I will move through this sermon time by lifting some information regarding William Blake. I will then read the poem entitled *Introduction*. Following this, I will give some interpretation of what the author might have had in mind. I will read some of why a national leader has found this poem of importance. And finally, I will close with some of my own reflection as to how this poem might speak to us.

William Blake was an English poet, painter, and engraver. He died August 12, 1827. He was largely unrecognized during his life, mostly because his work fit no known or accepted category. One 19th Century scholar wrote of Blake that he was “a man not forestalled by predecessors, nor to be classed with contemporaries, not to be replaced by known or readily surmisable successors.”

However, today, Blake is highly regarded for his expressiveness and creativity. He could perhaps be best understood as a mystic. He had a strong affirmation of the Scriptures and a strong personal faith but was very critical of the institutional Church. He was moved by the idealism of the French and American revolutions but was disillusioned by the violence that overtook the French revolution. He was heavily influenced by two mystics, Jacob Boehme, a German mystic of the 17th Century and Emanuel Swedenborg, a mystic of the 18th Century. Blake himself had visions, which, when one sees his prints, is not at all surprising. The spirit realm was very real for Mr. Blake.

*Songs of Innocence* was the first of Blake’s illuminated books, combining his writing and artist skills. It was published in 1789 and contains 21 poems engraved and illustrated beautifully on 21 copper plates. I invite you to visit the web link that was sent out on Friday and see some of the illustrations:  
<http://www.gailgastfield.com/innocence/soi.html>

Here is the opening poem from this collection known as the *Songs of Innocence* by William Blake:

**Introduction**

**Piping down the valleys wild,  
Piping songs of pleasant glee,  
On a cloud I saw a child,  
And he laughing said to me:**

**“Pipe a song about a lamb!”  
So I piped with merry cheer.  
“Piper, pipe that song again,”  
So I piped: he wept to hear.**

**“Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;  
Sing thy songs of happy cheer!”  
So I sung the same again,  
While he wept with joy to hear.**

**“Piper, sit thee down and write  
In a book that all may read.”  
So he vanished from my sight;  
And I plucked a hollow reed,**

**And I made a rural pen,  
And I stained the water clear,  
And I wrote my happy songs  
Every child may joy to hear.**

Blake’s poetry often has strong spiritual imagery. One possible interpretation:

*Piping down the valleys wild* - the ordinary paths of life that experience risk and uncertainty.

*Piping songs of pleasant glee* – proclaiming a message of hope and joy

*On a cloud I saw a child* – the Christ Child, the Incarnation of God.

*And he laughing said to me: “Pipe a song about a lamb!”* – The Christ Child urging the piper, the one proclaiming hope and joy, to talk about the Sacrificial Lamb, the gospel message of reconciliation.

*So I piped: he wept to hear.* – This is a joyful weeping, as is made clear in the next stanza: *Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe; Sing thy songs of happy cheer! So I sung the same again, While he wept with joy to hear.*

It is as if the Incarnational Child is asking to hear the Good News of the Gospel but in a different way. The first way was in the beauty of an instrument. The second way was in the sound of a voice singing. Both times brought tears of joy from the Christ Child. Obviously, he enjoys both ways of hearing the “song about a lamb.”

The child on the cloud then asks a third time for the piper to change. “Piper, sit thee down and write in a book that all may read.” This time the child disappears. But the piper proceeds and makes a natural pen from a hollow reed and makes ink by staining water that had been clear. And the piper says, “And I wrote my happy songs, Every child may joy to hear.” Not just the child on the cloud but every child.

One could conjecture that Blake was advocating that there are a variety of ways to proclaim joy and the Good News of the Gospel. For us that does not seem so profound. We are comfortable with the notion that there are many ways to speak of God and of Christ. But even for us, we will settle into what is comfortable for us and what is meaningful for us, and we really do not want our church to do any thing different. People are welcomed here as long as they can appreciate how we talk about our faith.

Can we hear the challenge of the “child on the cloud”? Are we willing to “drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe” to allow for a variety of ways to experience and to understand the Christian faith?

As I mentioned, this poem was lifted up by a civic leader involved in the Courage to Lead program. His name is Michael Singleton. He is the director of coaching for Massachusetts Youth Soccer.

He writes, *“As the head state coach for Massachusetts Youth Soccer, I help oversee 30,000 coaches working with over 200,000 children. My task is to teach coaches to see the game through the eyes of a child – each individual child. As coaches, we must realize and embrace the important role we have in children’s lives. It is a role that carries much responsibility and transcends a simple game. We coach self-esteem, creativity, social skills, leadership, discipline, sportsmanship, coordination, and teamwork while promoting intrinsic motivation. As a teacher of coaches, I yearn for my coaches to personally connect with each child and find delight in the role.”* [p.16]

Mr. Singleton did not read into Blake’s poem the strong religious imagery that I shared with you. Instead, he writes, “...Blake understood that we must always be experimenting with new ideas and playing with new methods as a teacher, a leader, and a coach. This poem reminds me to keep piping, singing, or writing or doing whatever I need to do to make more children happy and to teach others to do the same.” [p.16]

Any teacher knows the wisdom of these words. It is not the mark of a good teacher to establish one style and expect all the children or young adults to conform to that style. Nor is it a good indication of leaders within a congregation to expect that everyone new to the congregation must conform to the way that things are. Any more than it is a good articulation of faith to declare that there is only one way to understand correctly what it means to be a Christian in the 21st Century. Rather, we do well to seek continually new ways of communicating the essence of the joy of our faith.

I am also mindful that our task is to communicate the joy and hope of our faith. It does no good to become cynical. It does no good to wear our disappointments on our

sleeves. Our task is to reach out to those who are new to the community of faith, to those who are seeking meaning in life, to our children, and help them all hear the joy and hope that abounds in life.

In short, can we hold onto the vitality and passion of our message even as we go through the school of struggle, illness, and even face our mortality?

I share with you an email that I received from a cousin of mine just this last week. He gave his permission to share this with you. He is a very successful children’s dentist and is on faculty at the University of Minnesota. During his years of health, he lectured all over the country and in various parts of the world. About three years ago, he was diagnosed with a serious form of cancer.

“As most of you know, I found a way to have two heart attacks in May - one serious enough for the cardiologists to speak clearly about my impending demise. June has been for recuperation and rehabilitation. Walking in Seattle makes my heart beat hard...so my cardiac rehab team should be happy. July will for remounting the chemotherapy attacks on the tumor sites that are presently more numerous and more active than six months ago.

“There is no way to avoid the fact that long term chemotherapy leads to others risks, among them arterial disease and/or bleeding or thromboses. The body has to struggle with this balance. What is helpful and what causes trouble? No one knows for sure. Other than the rare one- or two-week breaks, I have been on chemotherapy steadily for three years and two months now. The cost may have mounted up! Yet, I have had these three years to enjoy. So, we walk the balance beam and continue going – a bit slower and weaker than before, but walking nonetheless.

“As much as my spirit often feels tired, it is always sparked up by connections with people. The wonder to be felt by taking a walk with a two-year-old grandson, for example, to be reminded of the mystery of each corner of nature from his fresh and small perspective, the joy to hold my two-month-old grandson and watch the multitude of changes that occur each week in his development, the pleasure of a quiet talk with one of my children, my wife, or one of my friends. These constitute the ‘good stuff’ that makes life worth living...All is a mystery as we continue on our path that skirts the cliffs of mortality. The balance is tenuous! Yet the views from the high path continue to stimulate us. Live fiercely and love often and stay connected with your people!”

All of us in our own way find ourselves “piping down the valleys wild.”

Can we “pipe” in such a way that we bring laughter and joy to those we love and to those whom we may not even know? And depending on the circumstances of our lives, can we lay the “pipe” down [whatever that is, that which is our primary way] and can we learn to pick up another way of sharing the joy and meaning of life with others?