

Stanwood United Methodist Church August 21, 2005

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## **Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) “A Man For The Ages”**

Kahlil Gibran was a poet, philosopher and artist. He was born in Lebanon in 1883. Lebanon is a land that has produced many prophets. The millions of Arabic-speaking peoples familiar with his writings in that language consider him the genius of his age. But he was a man whose fame and influence spread far beyond the Near East. His poetry has been translated into more than twenty languages. His drawings and paintings have been exhibited in the great capitals of the world and compared by Auguste Rodin to the work of William Blake. In the United States, which he made his home during the last twenty years of his life and where he died in 1931, he began to write in English. Kahlil Gibran's most famous work was “THE PROPHET”. Portions of this book are often read at weddings.

The Prophet and his other books of poetry, illustrated with his mystical drawings, are known and loved by innumerable Americans who find in them an expression of the deepest impulses of man's heart and mind.

These words from The Prophet expressed what marriage, at its best, could be.

And what of marriage, master?

And he answered saying:

You were born together, and together you shall be forevermore.

You shall be together when the white wings of death scatter your days.

Ay, you shall be together even in the silent memory of god.

But let there be spaces in your togetherness,

And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another, but make not a bond of love:

Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.

Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.

Give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf.

Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone,

Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.

Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.

For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.

And stand together yet not too near together:

For the pillars of the temple stand apart,

And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

(end of quote from The Prophet)

When I first decided to share some reflections about this author, I focused on this interesting question: What did Kahlil Gibran and Jesus Christ have in common.

Here are two similarities.

1. Both were rejected by religious power.

Jesus by various Jewish groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots), some of whom were part of the government then.

Kahlil Gibran by the Maronite Church and also by the Turkish government..

Why were these individuals a threat to the religious establishment of their day? They were willing break new ground in religious thought and practice, plus they were not impressed by so-called established truth. Jesus said: "It has been said of old, but I say to you."

2. They were loved by the common people. The masses. The poor heard Jesus gladly, with joy. The same was eventually true for Gibran. When Gibran's body was returned to Lebanon for burial, the roads were lined for miles by people willing to do homage to this native son.

(end of the comparison)

Like all great mystics Gibran was intensely religious. And it was because he was intensely religious that he rebelled against all bounds and limitations that would estrange the soul from its legitimate and free share of participation of the divine.

One writer concluded that "the hypocrite was the only doer of wrong whom Gibran excluded from his understanding and his forgiveness. His compassion extended to all others, no matter what their sin."

While Gibran was studying in Paris, he was overwhelmed by the tragedy of his nation's having to live under Turkish rule. He was pained also by the way the church had capitulated to privilege and power. He was just a twenty-year-old student at the time, but he decided that he had to speak about these things. He wrote and published in Arabic a book called "Spirits Rebellious". It reads like a series of four novels, but it also had some of the quality of the parables that Jesus told. His countrymen got the message. They read it correctly as a devastating attack on the rulers of his nation and on those who had corrupted the church. The book was called "Dangerous, revolutionary and poisonous of youth." There was a public burning of the book in Beirut. Gibran was excommunicated from the church and declared to be an exile from his native land. But that is all changed now. By the 1970's the book was taught as a classic in the public schools of Lebanon.

Hear the power in these words from "Jesus Knocking at the Gate of Heaven".

Father, my Father, open Your gate!

I bring with me a goodly company.

Open the gate that we may come in.

We are the children of Your heart, each one and all.

Open, my Father, open Your gate.

Father, my Father, I knock at Your gate.

I bring a thief who was crucified with me this very day.

In spite of this

He is a gentle soul, and he would be Your guest.

He thieved a loaf for his children's hunger.

But I know the light in his eyes would gladden you.

Father, my Father, open Your gate.

I bring a woman who gave herself to loving,

And they raised stones against her,

But knowing Your deeper heart, I held them back.

The violets are not withered in her eyes,

And Your April is yet upon her lips.

Her hands still hold the harvest of Your days,

And now she would enter with me to Your house.

Father, my Father, open the gate.

I bring to you a murderer,

A man with twilight on his face.

He hunted, for his young,

But unwisely did he hunt.

The warmth of the sun was upon his arms,  
The sap of Your Earth was in his veins;  
And he desired meat for his kin  
Where meat was denied,  
But his bow and arrow were too ready,  
And he committed murder.  
And for this he is now with me.

Father, my Father, open Your gate.  
I bring with me a drunkard,  
A man who thirsted for other than this world.  
It was his to set at Your board, with a cup,  
With loneliness at his right hand,  
And at his left hand desolation.  
He gazed deep into the cup  
And therein he saw Your stars mirrored in the wine,  
And he drank deep for he would reach Your sky.

He would reach his greater self,  
But he was lost upon the way, and he fell down.  
I raised him, Father, from outside the Inn,  
And he came with me, laughing half the way.  
Now, though in my company, he weeps,  
For kindness hurts him.  
And for this I bring him to Your gate.

Father, my Father, open the gate.

I bring with me a gambler,

A man who would turn his silver spoon into a golden sun;

And like one of your spiders

Would weave the web and wait

For the fly that was also hunting the smaller flies.

But he lost like all gamblers,

And when I found him wandering the streets of the city

I looked into his eyes,

And I knew that his silver turned not into gold,

And the thread of his dreams was broken.

And I bade him to my company.

I said to him "Behold your brothers' faces

And My face.

Come with us, we are going to the fertile land beyond the hills of life.

Come with us."

And he came.

Father, my Father, You have opened the gate!

Behold, my friends.

I have sought them far and near;

But they were in fear and would not come with me

Until I revealed to them Your promise and Your grace.

Now, that you have opened Your gate  
And received and welcomed my companions,  
There are on Earth no sinners,  
Shut away from You and Your receiving.  
There is neither hell nor purgatory;  
Only You and haven exist, and upon Earth, Man,  
The son of Your ancient heart.

This was Gibran.

Kahlil Gibran was born in 1883 in Bsherri, Lebanon, a small village in the mountains near the cedars of Lebanon mentioned in the Bible. People have lived in that village for 4000 years. Stories about the people who lived there thousands of years ago were told to this young boy by a Maronite Church priest who used to take him for long walks to the cedars and to the ruins of an old monastery. Sometimes his mother sang to him some of the folk songs that told of the ancient heroes of their land. Gibran always spoke of his mother with great tenderness. He said: "My mother never wrote any poetry, but she lived a thousand poems."

When he was eleven years old, his mother took him, his brother and two sisters to the United States. They lived in a slum area of Boston. Two years later Kahlil was sent back to Lebanon to finish his schooling. He graduated from college in Beirut with highest honors. He then went to Paris to study painting under Rodin. When he was 27 he moved to the United States and rented a studio apartment in New York City. There he did his sketching and painting and writing. He published seven books in Arabic and 13 in English. He died in New York City in 1931 at the age of 48.

Gibran always spent Good Friday alone meditating on the life and passion of Jesus. He tried to feel in himself all of the suffering experienced by Jesus. He did this again on Good Friday, 1931. He had not been well. He was suffering from a form of cancer. But he insisted, as usual, on being alone for his sharing of the passion of the Master. That night some friends came into his apartment and found him stretched out on the floor in the form of a cross and unconscious. They took him to the hospital, and the Friday after Easter he was gone.

Memorial services were held in New York and Boston and Beirut. In each place great crowds of people came to honor him. Following the service in Beirut they took the casket carrying his body up the coast to Tripoli and then up the mountains, up over passes 9,000 feet high, to Bsherri. Along the way people gathered in every village and at every crossroads to bow in honor to the most famous of their sons. The casket was placed in the ruins of the old monastery where the old priest used to take him when he was a boy, a place that is within sight of the ancient cedars of Lebanon.

Quoting this creative man of faith once more: “And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.

And when the earth shall claim your limbs, Then shall you truly dance.”