

Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia on Sunday February 15<sup>th</sup> 2009 by the  
Reverend Alan Neale  
“Connection - The Paths”

Today we come to the third and final sermon in a series of three which reflects with Biblical and theological eyes upon this book, *The Soloist* by Steve Lopez. This book is the text chosen for the 2009 One Book, One Philadelphia program.

First, a brief apologia for the very series itself. It is, I believe firmly, the mission of the church that we are aware of, and are able to comment upon with Biblical and theological understanding, the events and the concerns of the world in which we live. This is not to say, in any way, that the world sets the agenda for the church but it is to say that everything, absolutely everything, that happens matters to God. Our belief in Incarnation (“the word became flesh” - John 1:14) encourages us, nay compels us to treat the world with divine kindness and to look for God in the world. I believe also that God expects of us, encourages us, to be “pontifices” - bridge builders. Last week we heard these encompassing and energetic words from St. Paul (and listen for the word “all!”) - “I have become ALL things to ALL people so that by ALL means I might win some for Christ” (I Corinthians 9:22). Our program to keep church doors open, our midweek worship, our music and art and children’s’ programs, our wedding ministry, this very series... are all bridges over which, only God knows, who may travel.

But... back to the book, *The Soloist*. Steve Lopez, now a journalist for the L.A. Times and once a journalist for the Philadelphia Inquirer, Steve Lopez says that the book is all about “the power to connect” - the connection between an articulate and economically comfortable writer and Nathaniel Ayers, a homeless musician living on Skid Row suffering the anguish and isolation of mental illness. And so our sermon series is named “Only Connect. Connection - opportunities, challenges and today... paths to connection”.

Originally I had thought the “paths to connection” were obvious, I could see the sermon beginning to take shape... the paths? Well, music and friendship.

**Music...** when Mr. Ayers was a student at Juillard, he studied and played the cello but so important is his connection with music that he begins to play a more accessible instrument, the violin. Mr. Ayers tells Mr. Lopez, “The violin was easier to lug around in a shopping cart. There’s no way to keep playing a big upright string-bass, he says, while living on the streets. But he still has Saint-Saens, Mozart, Brahms, Dvorak, Haydn and Beethoven in his head so he tries to make something of their compositions on his two-stringed violin”. And later in the book, Steve Lopez comments, “[Nathaniel Ayers] has survived in his own way and on his own terms, sustained for decades by music”.

Music connected Mr. Ayers, at least a little, with life and the world and it seemed also to grant him some temporary respite for the tragic disconnection he felt within himself! Lopez writes, “Music is an anchor, a connection to great artists, to history and to himself... music is his way to be alone without fear.”

**And friendship...** on the very front of the book we read that it is about “an unlikely friendship”. A fellow L.A. Times journalist (Edward Humes) describes the friendship between Ayers and Lopez as “an unusual and mutually rewarding friendship” surprising, Hume adds, for Lopez tends to project a rather curmudgeonly image in his columns. Mr. Hume writes, “*The Soloist*” is Lopez’s compelling and gruffly tender account of what can happen when you don’t step past” - in other words, of what can happen when you... connect. And Lopez’s friendship with Ayers leads him to connect deeply with the plight of those men and women who are without hope, without a job, without a home and without the promise of mental stability and serenity.

But behind the music, and behind the friendship, is something else... a greater, more profound path to connection. And it is... a passionate surrender!

In the book, Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson writes, ““Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon.”

“With complete abandon” Nathaniel Ayers gives himself to his music and no physical condition, no damaged instrument, no threat of human safety serves to impede that “complete abandon”.

“With complete abandon” Steve Lopez gives himself to the friendship between himself and Nathaniel Ayers and no frustration, no disappointment, no set-back serves to impede that “complete abandon”.

And with a disregard for “half-measures” and a commitment to “complete abandon”, Ayers and Lopez find what all humans deeply crave (for which we are designed)... connection!

In today’s reading from 2 Kings (chapter 5) we read of a successful, powerful man (Naaman) who clearly wishes to re-connect with health and his place in society. Ultimately, through various stages, Naaman is offered the path to wholeness... (2 Kings 5:10) “Go wash in the Jordan seven times and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean” but, we read (very next verses!) “Naaman lost his temper, he turned on his heels. He stomped off, mad as a hornet” (and, of course, that reading comes from the Message translation).

Ultimately Naaman comes to his senses... scorning half-measures, embracing complete abandon, he washes in the Jordan and (v.14, Message translation again!) “his skin was healed, it was like the skin of a little baby. He was as good as new”.

In his letter to the Corinthian Christians (chapter 9) Paul writes “run in such a way that you may win the prize”. Here are no half-measures, here is complete abandon. Here we read of Paul’s overwhelming, far-reaching, comprehensive, extensive, sweeping concern that he be connected with his Lord and that he do all he can to connect others with that same Lord.

And though the healed leper ignored the words of Jesus and, instead of holy reticence, went about telling all of his healing and wholeness (Mark 1:45 “as soon as the man was out of earshot, he told everyone he met what had happened, spreading the news all over town”) I wonder whether Jesus smiled when he heard the news and imagined the scene. The man once alienated and isolated by his leprosy was now an ambassador for Christ to the people! No half-measures there!

In the eighteenth century, after the Anglican Bishop, Joseph Butler, had met with the enthusiastic and evangelical John Wesley, Butler wrote... “the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Spirit is a horrid thing... a very horrid thing indeed” and, thereby, almost with a word Christian enthusiasm was dismissed by the Established church and lost for decades!

Towards the end of the book, Steve Lopez describes a friend as someone “who inspires, who challenges, who sends you in search of some truer sense of yourself”. I would add “someone who discourages me from half-measures and encourages me to embrace God, to embrace today with... complete abandon” for this is the path to connection.

Friends, we have such a friend... today Jesus Christ encourages us, urges us, to return to those tasks, those relationships, those hurts, those disappointments, those hopes from which we have been disconnected. And our divine Friend walks with us... “Half measures avail us nothing. We stand at the turning point. We ask His protection and care with complete abandon” and... He will not fail us. Alleluia. Amen.