

July 11, 2010 Grove Presbyterian Church

“Remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” That was the only time I ever heard Atticus say it was a sin to do something, and I asked Miss Maudie about it.

“Your father’s right,” she said. “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy . . . but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.”

[Play Birdsong]

Mockingbirds. They most often sing at night, when we need their song the most. Songs in threes, trills of threes.

Hush, little baby, don't say a word,
Mama's gonna buy you a mockingbird.
If that mockingbird don't sing,
Mama's gonna buy you a diamond ring.

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Scout, through whose eyes we see Maycomb’s world, is beginning to see it all. The book, To Kill a Mockingbird, whose 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary we celebrate today, is far more than about the trial. The whole town sags from sorrow and routine.

- ▲ Dill and all his lies about his daddy, wanting to be a new kind of clown – one that stands in the middle of the ring and laughs at the folks
- ▲ The Radleys and their dark secret
- ▲ The Cunninghams, trying to maintain their dignity amidst their crushing poverty
- ▲ Maudie who maybe wishes Atticus would look at her in a different way
- ▲ Miss Henry Lafayette Dubose and addiction and dying
- ▲ Mayella Ewell, lonely and unloved

Then Tom Robinson’s trial , where all the ugliness comes out before it can be tucked back away. The Ewells and Robinsons, the town itself, on trial.

Sad. And wonderful.

What Harper Lees does is what too many authors don’t or can’t or won’t. She peels back the skin, she exposes the truth, she pulls back the curtains with such decency and humanity. She cares. These are her people, her neighbors. If you want truth, read fiction.

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We bear it. We've been there. The book is about us. Partly why I made my visit to where Harper Lee wrote this novel one of my first stops on my trip. Maycomb, Monroeville, Danville.

This is what somebody showed me. She showed me this about this congregation. She described us as a congregation in incredible pain. Nearly broke her heart. She's never known a congregation as transparent about its pain, its hurts, its sorrow. She meant it as a kindness about Grove.

We bear pain. Perhaps it's because many of you are surrounded by life and death matters every day. Emotional pain. Spiritual pain. Physical pain. There's little time to waste pretending.

I think it is because we're pushed to understand how life is not the absence of pain but how you deal with it daily. Life isn't either/or, but both/and. A matter of grays.

*When I was younger I saw things in black and white
Now all I see is a sad, hazy gray
Sometimes I see a narrow flash of light
Sometimes I look and you show me the way*

*No matter what else happens
What the future will be
In a world so uncertain
Through the clouds it's hard to see
I will grab you and carry you
Calm your fears if you're afraid
We'll go walking
Across the fields of gray*

-- B. R. Hornsby, "Fields of Gray:"

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We can get a bit lathered up about that so called "Unforgiveable Sin." Those who do (or those who mock it) confuse simply telling the truth as some kind of divine retribution. Lord knows, there's enough self-punishment going on around – why does God need to jump in and start kicking us when we're down?

What Jesus is talking about it are those folks unable to be forgiven because they shut themselves off from the possibility of feeling forgiven.

This passage isn't about insulting the Holy Spirit (as if anything we could say or do could insult God); they're denying their own chance for a taste of joy.

Joy – wouldn't that be something given so much quiet daily desperation.

Can you imagine what it would be like to feel innocent again?

Closed up, closed off, refusing to admit weakness or hurt or need or pain, possibly because it's just too scary to be loved, to be free. Grace is terribly scary because you can't quite predict where it's going to take you.

So they themselves shut themselves down. They shoot the mockingbird in themselves. They kill their own song. How then can they listen to their own music?

*Mockingbirds don't do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird.*

*-- Atticus Finch*

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Often the view of God in the Old Testament is assumed to be thundering and ferocious. Awe-ful and mysterious. Actually, there's less of that bother than people think.

Along comes Isaiah with new visions for hurting people, people who've lost everything. A people who see themselves forgotten by God, now homeless, captive, empty, joyless. They've been beaten up bad.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

We're invited to hear this as if a King is introducing the governor who is going to take over for him for a while. There's no bombast here, no threats, no laying down the law, no shoulds or oughts. No yelling.

Here the servant of God kneels. Jesus kneels.

You see a bruised reed or cracked stick. What's our first instinct? I know what I do. Pick it up, toy with it in our hands, break it. Ordinarily the bruised reed is tossed aside, thrown away, broken, tossed in the fire.

Here it is restored, mended.

Here the servant kneels and places his hands around the dimly burning wick, lest the wind snuff out the flame. He tends to it till it grows brightly again.

It's about justice. Mishpat, in Hebrew: justice, balance, us finally waking up from our comas and getting right in our relationship with others and with God.

Mishpat: could be more important than love.

Mishpat beats at the very heart of the book, To Kill a Mockingbird.

- Miss Dubose given courage to be free of her morphine addiction, conscious and cantankerous to the end
- Link Deas, to make amends for the town, giving Helen Robinson a job even though he really doesn't need her
- Dill given the chance to have friends, at least during summertime
- Being straightforward when you answer children because they can spot an evasion
- Scout confused by folks she knows from around town bent on lynching
- Scout seeing her teacher's hypocrisy in condemning Hitler for his persecution of the Jews but on the street voicing her prejudice against her black neighbors.
- Jem angry by the injustice done to Tom by the jury
- Mayella shown to be a victim too
- Atticus' conviction that the integrity of our courts and the jury system is no ideal -- it is a living, working reality.
- The truth about Boo Radley revealed to Scout and Jem
- Jem waking from his coma, recovering from being injured, protecting his sister

Mishpat. Could be more important than love. Trying to get it right. What we can get right. Things made right. Just a little justice restored in our own towns so we can be what we can be. An injured people mended.

*When they finally saw him, why he hadn't done any of those things . . .
Atticus, he was real nice. . . ."*

His hands were under my chin, pulling up the cover tucking it around me.

"Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them."

*He turned out the light and went into Jem's room. *

He would be there all night, and he would be there when Jem waked up in the morning.

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It really is a boxful of trinkets these homes and towns of ours. Where each of us live.

We open the lid. I love that scene from the opening credits for the movie version of To Kill A Mockingbird. You see the cigar box and inside all those items, each one of memory. The crayons. The key. The marbles. The carved soap dolls. One jack. A small penknife. Several coins. A medal. A pencil. The small chains and safety pin. The harmonica and whistle. The nib of a pen. The pocket watch stopped at seven before 2.

Such is the rummage of the small things of our souls, which together are so very precious.

Beautiful. And sad. And wonderful.

*So hush little baby don't you cry,  
Cuz Mama loves you and so do I.*

There are many mockingbirds all around us, when we let them sing for us.

**[Play Birdsong]**