

In Memory of Ralph Aldrich

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Rev. Jay Sprout

Professor Ralph Aldrich, as an expert in English, was, like me, a stickler for grammar. Martha-Jane called him the perpetual proof-reader. My elder daughter certainly knows that title describes me too. She gave me this T-shirt for my birthday a few years ago. It reads: "I am silently correcting your grammar." Hmm. the more I think about it, I'm not sure this gift was an expression of affection. But as they say, "If the shirt fits..." And it does, both literally and figuratively. I almost never literally wear it, mind you, but figuratively I always have it on. (And I just grit my teeth when people say "literally" when they mean "figuratively".)

Tonight I need to make a few grammatical points about several of the Scripture passages you have heard, or in the case of the 23rd Psalm, sung, this evening. I mean no disrespect to their Biblical authors. Heaven forbid! I prefer to call my quibbles the "grammar of grace".

Please forgive that opening digression. But it kind of reminds me of the digressions which usually preceded the beginning of North Country Chorus rehearsals under the leadership of that master of mirth in the tenor section. The happy diversions also included the distribution of miniature Tootsie Rolls, many delivered via, uh, Aldrich's Air Express. I wonder how often Mary Rowe was puzzled about our initially poor vocal exercises as we tried to sing while chewing and swallowing those gooey candies.

But enough with the digressions. Down to spiritual business.

In over four decades as a pastor dealing with deaths in the family, I've conducted, Lord knows, how many funerals. And in almost every case, the grieving families have specifically requested the 23rd Psalm, which we just sang to the lyrical tune "Brother James Air". But why? Why is it that when we face the reality of death the wisdom of the ages and our own experiences with death moves us to sing this song of David, the most memorized, most cherished literature in all of faith? What is it in these six short verses that draws us back at times of death and grief as our primary source of comfort? Obviously, we find here reassuring words of God's care. But the Bible is full of such words of assurance. God's everlasting love is what the whole book is about. There's something more here, isn't there?

First, I note that though the psalm is beautifully written, (or at least beautifully translated by King James' team of scholars 400 years ago), it is remarkably simple. The language has lofty Elizabethan cadences, but the images are the humble stuff of everyday life. These images – a shepherd, a flock, a meadow with a quiet brook, a valley, a table, a house – tell us about the days of our lives and about our God. The psalmist sings about those simplest of things that really count – rest and peace, want and sufficiency, trust, integrity, faithfulness and hope. Yes, the simplest, most eternal things, though never mentioned by name, are metaphorically represented here in the 23rd Psalm. This psalm is a song from the heart, to the heart of all humanity. Ralph's vocation was teaching, but his avocation was singing. And his life sang his own version of this song of life in his beautiful tenor voice.

The high note of his life, if you will, was his marriage to one Martha-Jane Holmes. I say "one Martha-Jane Holmes" because theirs was a singular relationship. When I think about their marriage Kurt Vonnegut's coined words "karass" and "duprass" in his novel *Cat's Cradle* come to

mind. Vonnegut's "karass" is a group of people linked in a cosmically significant manner. And a "duprass" is a "karass" that consists of only two people. The two members of a duprass live lives that revolve around each other. Martha-Jane and Ralph, right? Ralph and Martha-Jane traveled through life together, often quite literally on numerous tours with Elderhostel (now Road Scholars), and the Nashua Chorale Society and of course, on many tours with his beloved North Country Chorus. Martha-Jane never missed a single performance when Ralph was singing. Really Martha? Not one of the countless gigs at Lyndon State commencements, convocations and student orientations? Even the time she got turned around heading to LSC for one of the college's St. Patrick's Day concerts – a tradition Ralph instituted and continued to produce for many years well into his retirement—and wound up in Peacham. But she made it even then, though maybe not in time to claim her traditional seat in the back row? At all of those performances, she was there. And also at many of the rehearsals.

Such was their marriage, their duprass.

Speaking of marriage, we heard St. Paul's inspired paean to love this evening, which is probably more often read at weddings than at funerals. When couples ask that 1 Corinthians 13 be included in a wedding ceremony, I gladly oblige, but I also feel obliged to let them know that the author of this poem was a confirmed bachelor who had no thought of romance here. I assume an English professor would like classic language. I know that Ralph loved classic cars so let's say I'm right about language, too. Anyhow, King James' team of scholars preferred to translate the word for "love" here as "charity". And this classic use of the word "charity" in the much beloved KJV has much to recommend it. The Greek word for love here is not a warm feeling for a sweetheart but an act of determined will for the good of all people. Like charity. Takes some of the romance out of it, doesn't it?

Charity is more like selling Easter cakes for the North Country Chorus. Harry Rowe and Ralph competed selling those fabled Easter cakes baked in the shape of giant eggs in canned-ham tins. Harry always won. The good doctor wrote prescriptions for those cakes, I think. Ralph could only strong-arm underpaid faculty and poor college students into buying them. Of course, he would bring two of them to church here on Easter Sunday. His diet didn't allow for too many sweets, so he passed them on to us.

Charity is not just promoting good causes but also giving generous support, like to the North Country Chamber Players and setting up a fund like the E. Ralph and Martha-Jane Aldrich Scholarship Foundation at LSC. Music was his gift from God which he gladly shared. Even when he needed a wheel chair to get around, he was still singing for patients at the Littleton Hospital.

Naming love as charity isn't sexy, I know, but it puts the truth of married love front and center. Because married love is more, much more, than a feeling. It is a commitment to the work of love from which are derived love's greatest rewards. Vonnegut might call such a marriage a duprass. But in the loftier sentiments of Plato, a good marriage is the reunion of two halves of the same soul. And when we speak of a spouse as our better half, perhaps we should be thinking about the better half of marriage: the work that makes the romance go on forever.

Ralph's was a truly loving heart which beat for the good of all of us, and most especially for the love of his life, Martha-Jane. In this sense his heart, though it had a bout of physical weakness, was always strong. They took their marriage vows with absolute seriousness. Martha-Jane's

care for Ralph in his last years was an awesome model of fidelity. (*I wish I had said "high fidelity" to make a musical pun.*) The strength of a life of loving and being loved is shown in how Martha-Jane could keep her chin up in adversity; how she could, as Paul says, "bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things." (*I Corinthians 13:7*) And there was much to endure, including her own life-threatening collision with a careless driver. In the face of it all Martha-Jane willed herself to do what was necessary to fulfill the promise of love that does not end.

There is steadfast love in the 23rd Psalm, too. But I think the real hook in this psalm is this. Yes, the psalm does begin beside the quiet waters and in green pastures, but, before the song is ended, it takes us through the darkest valley, the valley of the dark shadows, the valley of death. And I always call attention to the grammatical shift here, how the psalm changes at this crossroads in the dark valley. No longer does the psalmist speak about God as "the Lord" and "he", but addresses God as "you". Can I as a grammarian allow the psalmist to just switch from third person to second person in the middle of his poem? (Can we, Ralph?)

Actually I think there is no grammatical error here. Rather, what we have is a profound statement of faith. The psalmist changes person halfway through to drive home the point that right where we need God most, just when dark shadows start to fall, the way grows steep and narrow, God comes, not as "him-over-there," perhaps as a theological topic to talk about, but as "you-right-here," as a presence, in person to lead the way. Thou, God, you come to us with the reassurance that only your own self can bring.

So I will allow that grammatical inconsistency. But even so, many people still have trouble reconciling the theological inconsistency of how this eternally watchful shepherding God in Psalm 23 would allow such calamities to happen in the first place. Fact is, of course, that all too often the lives of good people are darkened in shadows, like the Parkinson's Disease and the ensuing dementia that Ralph suffered from for the past eight years. But the psalmist insists that the grace of God is present to us in every circumstance of life.

The most helpful and concise response to this paradox that that I have heard comes from the chaplain at Yale during my Divinity School days. Some years after we had both left Yale and ten days after the sudden death of his 21-year-old son, William Sloane Coffin, still reeling from his son's death said to his congregation at Riverside Church in New York City: "In my intense grief I felt some of my fellow ministers were using comforting words of Scripture for self-protection, to pretty up a situation whose bleakness they simply could not face...But what God gave me is what God gives to all of us: minimum protection, and maximum support." Accepting this essential truth of life can keep us sane in a grief-filled world, and also honest before God.

Does God protect us as an all-powerful interventionist? The evidence tells me No. Does God provide a means of support in the midst of our tragedies? Faith tells me Yes.

The psalmist knew that. He speaks to God, not just of God, and says, "Your rod and your staff, they comfort me," not, "they protect me." On a literal level, the shepherd's rod and staff are tools of protection. But while God's rod and God's staff will not always protect us from darkness, they will lead us through every bit of that darkness, comforting us every step of the way. Yes, God provides minimum protection, but maximum support. The irony is that if we are looking for a God who will provide absolute protection, we can miss out on the God who offers this constant support.

No, God does not promise to prevent pain and tragedy. Even if we are blessed with long life, we will encounter suffering. And here is where we can trust the honesty of the 23rd Psalm. It

promises no detours for those who love the Lord, no endless drive through the Vermont countryside in foliage season in Ralph's red convertible. Just as surely as the green trees of summer will turn to their fabled autumn colors and then those beautiful leaves will wither and fall, there is death, and there is no miraculous deliverance from the dark and dread of death.

But the psalm does hold out that one sure promise --that when the time comes that we fall from the tree of life God will be there, will be with us through the pain; God promises to give us the power of a presence so that we can cope, so that the pain of loss, of heartbreak, and even the prospect of our own dying does not overwhelm us; that every step we take, every fear we know, God knows it with us; that in the valley of the shadow God will grasp our hand, as God did Ralph's hand, and never let it go.

The God who is our good shepherd really does restore our souls with goodness and mercy all the days of our lives. And a key to how God restores our souls is found in our gospel reading from John. Recalling the words of Jesus to his own closest friends on earth, Jesus promised he would not leave them orphaned, that "the counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you".

I have no quarrel with the grammar of this passage, but I do question the way we often hear it. Do we hear this truth applying uniquely to Jesus as the divine son of God? Or is Jesus stating a universal, very human truth?

I believe that Jesus is saying, "When I am gone, when I am no longer present in body, you will be able to have a spiritual communication with me in my absence." And it's not just Jesus, the holy mystic, who can say this. It is a common, everyday mystical experience that people with whom we are bound in love are people from whom we can never be totally separated. Because the Holy Spirit works in us too, through the power of sustaining memory. Ralph's spirit can bring to our remembrance everything of his life that was of value, everything that he said that connected our lives with his, and our lives with each other, in every gesture that told us the depths of his caring, to sustain us in our grief, if we pay close attention. Our loving memories distill the essence of Ralph, purifying our relationship, forgiving any missteps and leaving only the love, and helping you to see more clearly the beauty of his time among us. Martha-Jane, when you sang with Ralph "I'll be seeing you in all those old familiar places, that this heart of mine embraces", you were anticipating this truth.

Certainly in Ralph's case memories might come as song. Even when he could not find words to say what was on his mind, he could break into song. And I can now hear Ralph singing the opening solo of Handel's Messiah, as he did with us in the NCC so many times: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God."

And I hear echoes of that comfort in Jesus words to his closest friends:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled... "Do not let them be afraid."

Prayers of Thanksgiving

God of green pastures and still waters, and also of the darkest valleys, we give thanks that Jesus Christ is our Shepherd, who did not fear the power of death, but walked into its shadowed valley, emerging into the bright light of resurrection to proclaim the good news that you give life and you conquer death; that we are held forever in your loving hands.

We thank you that for Ralph all sickness and sorrow are ended, and death itself is past and that he has entered the home where all your people gather in peace.

Lead us, God of goodness: lead us into those places where your mercy waits to nourish our weary souls, where your grace feeds our famished hearts.

Lead us, Gentle Shepherd, to those sanctuaries of hope, where we feel the joy of the words of remembrance, comfort, and hope that we have shared. So may we fill our grief with gratitude: gratitude for the love that Ralph shared so abundantly, for the warm glow of his smile, for his welcoming sense of humor, for his openness and companionship, for his attention to commitments that made him responsible, for the compassion and spontaneity of his heart that made him able to respond to your call to service so effectively. For everything about him that made him so genuinely nice and a treasured joy of our lives, we give our most hearty thanks.

May our memories be ever more joyful, our days enriched with friendship, and our lives embraced with the comfort of your love that we may face each new day with hope of resurrection, the trust that he who has died is alive in us today, and the certainty that nothing can destroy the love he gave and the love he received. May the love that flowed through him now surge in us, and the good works that he accomplished continue in our lives to bring good in this world that he cherished and sought to preserve for future generations. Keep us all in communion with your faithful people in every time and place, that at last we may rejoice together in the heavenly reunion where Jesus Christ reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever.

All this we ask through Jesus Christ our Savior as we earnestly continue to pray for the coming of your Kingdom with the words that he taught us...

Committal

In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother Ralph; and we commit his body to safe keeping until it be returned to earth from which it came.

Rest eternal grant to him, O Lord: and let light perpetual shine upon him. May his soul, and the souls of all the departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.