

Sermon 2010 Easter 7

Text: Revelation 22:1-6, 12-20

Theme: "Hard Times Come Again No More"

Stephen Foster was an American song writer in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who wrote some of the most well know music of that age and even well known to this day. Among his most famous works were: "My Old Kentucky Home," "Beautiful Dreamer," "Oh Susannah," and "Swanee River." He was known chiefly for his parlor songs, such as Beautiful Dreamer and his minstrel songs in which he seemed to have a deep understanding of the plight of slaves in the south. The African slaves in the United States were not unusual. They are the only slaves with which we have a particular connection, but the plight of slavery, though sometimes worse or better, is still the plight of slavery.

How do you go on with life when you are owned by another human being? Where do you find any hope for a better life? The reality is that what you have is what you will always have for the most part and barring a miracle, you will never have much because you are a slave. So slaves have a tendency to look beyond the tomorrows that we so readily worship. They do not think of next year or even 10 years. They think of eternity. Slaves look to their God to deliver them from the horror that is so often their lives. So the Africans who were brought to America in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries discovered a religion in Christianity that spoke deeply to their situation and the Holy Spirit grabbed a hold of them and they grabbed a hold of Jesus. Even today, as a

generalization, the Black community is a deeply spiritual and deeply faithful people.

Many if not all of the slave songs are focused on the last day when no matter what happens in this life, all the pain and suffering will be reversed. Suffering and pain in this life is a reality but we are able to live with a level of joy because we know that all things are in God's hands and eventually the hard times will come again no more.

Right now, we are experiencing some hard times at Trinity as the hard times in peoples' lives trickle down to the church. Our offerings have been consistently down this year. Each week we hope to see things go up and each week they either stay the same or go down. Everything else is great around here. There is an atmosphere of joy and energy that one can feel. We have wonderful music and worship. Our Dorcas Guild and LWML are powerful mission driven women and our dart teams are filled with the men who are the backbone of this congregation. We have close to a hundred youth involved in the life of the congregation; ushering, acolyting, playing music, singing, going on retreats and servant events. In short, we have a whole bunch of hard working people who strive to give their all in serving God – so it is especially frustrating that we are being held back by money. It's like when you are all ready to complete your project and you're missing one crucial part that was not included in the package. It's like when you have all the ingredients for your famous

chocolate chip cookies in the mixing bowl at 11:00 at night only to discover that someone ate the last of the chocolate chips.

But God never allows hard times to come without using them to strengthen us and teach us. Stephen Foster said in his song, "Hard Times Come Again No More,"

"Let us pause in life's pleasures and count its many tears while we all sup sorrow with the poor; There's a song that will linger forever in our ears; Oh! Hard Times come again no more."

These difficult times give us huge opportunity to re-evaluate what is important to us. In a given week, is the ministry that is done in this place more or less important to you than say that froufrou coffee drink or a movie at the theater? These hard times make us realize that three or four dollars a week can make a difference in what we are trying to do here. Too often, when times are good, we think our gift is too small to matter. We look at the envelopes going past us and see \$100 or \$200 on the front and we think, "what does my gift matter?" But in these kind of times, every gift matters.

In hard times, God helps us understand that every cog is important and that if the wheel is to roll, we need every cog to function. Sometimes we think we can overlook certain members of the family. Foster says,

"While we seek mirth and beauty and music light and gay, there are frail forms fainting at the door." No one is expendable. Every single member of this family comes with gifts that we

desperately need. It is times like these that we pull together and we all put in what we have and when we do that, God will both bless us and our gifts to do more than we imagined could be done. That frail form fainting at the door is the one of us who seems to have so little and yet is filled with the power of God. When things are good and there is plenty, we can easily overlook those who seem to have too little to offer but it is not the size of the gift that matters but that the gift is given. That gift both blesses the giver and the Church. We don't really understand why it works like that, but we know from Scripture that it does indeed work like that and these hard times bring us back to that truth.

We are not the few blest carrying the rest into heaven but rather the whole family walking hand in hand into the light of Christ. We live for that day. And on that day, those who walk through the gates are those who have washed their robes in the blood of the lamb; not those who have accumulated the most material goods, not those who have lived an outwardly pious and holy life, not those who have achieved great notoriety on earth but those who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. He is the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and end. He is the all in all. HE IS!

Hard times are a wonderful blessing. Times like these refocus us on the Lamb sitting on his throne and remind us that we are not here to achieve but to manage whatever he gives us

to manage. Whether it is a great deal or a small amount, he has given it to you to manage and in the end, it is all his anyway. So don't be discouraged or frightened by these hard times. Allow the Lord to use these times to refocus your heart, redefine your management plan and remember to count the tears that fall in this valley because the day will soon come when we will never cry again. AMEN