

We Walk Away Limping...but Rejoicing: The Unexpected Poetry of Fr. Kilian McDonnell

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Years ago I vowed never to read poetry in my sermons. This vow has its roots in experiencing too many special services devoted to women in which the speaker (usually the pastor's wife) would inevitably read a poem. These poems, which were probably found in *Leaves of Gold*,¹ extolled the virtues of motherhood and domestic life, and as they were read aloud, the speaker's voice would break and the tears would flow. I remember being embarrassed and uncomfortable more than blessed.

The women who read these poems were sincere. But they always seemed unsure of their public presence. Looking back, it seems that poetry provided a ready made script for a sometimes hesitant voice. It was a script that I did not want to own.

Thankfully, in my tradition there were other options for women behind the pulpit. One of those options was the rough and tough preacher. These women were known for their powerful messages which were filled with apocalyptic images, descriptions of heaven and hell, and narratives of healing and salvation. The warrior preachers of my childhood were gifted with a public voice that was deep and resounding. They were truth-telling women whose preaching would send us into the altars for extended periods of prayer. Here we would wrestle with God who seemed to demand our total surrender. After hours of prayer we, like Jacob, came away limping but rejoicing.

Growing up I always wanted to be one of the warrior preachers. I wanted to preach with power and conviction. I wanted to create an atmosphere wherein people would contend with God. That meant, among other things, that I did not read poetry from the pulpit.

Now, in middle age, I have come to realize that I am never going to be the rough and tough warrior preacher. Perhaps I am too married to the Academy. Or perhaps I have learned that preaching is not always a contest of endurance. So, over the years, I have developed my own style. Deep down, however, it is still my desire to preach with words of truth and power. I still long for my words to provoke people to wrestle with God, walking away limping but rejoicing.

While I would label my preaching style as poetic, making great use of metaphor and organizing the sermon toward an organic unity, I have found few poets who are able to convey the cutting edge of truth required in preaching the gospel. That is until I discovered the poetry of Fr. Kilian McDonnell. His poetry is raw and imaginative, fit for wrestling with God, fit for a warrior preacher, be that person male or female.

McDonnell is a Benedictine monk/theologian at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. He is well known as an ecumenist, having founded the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, a research center for scholars and pastoral leaders.

From 1973 until 2003 he served as the Roman Catholic Co-Chair of the International Classical Pentecostal/Roman Catholic Dialogue. In this sometimes tense and conflictive environment, Fr. Kilian helped create an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust. As one of the participants on the Pentecostal side, I always sensed that

McDonnell respected us and valued us as fellow Christians. Over the course of three decades, he helped steer Pentecostals and Roman Catholics toward better understanding and common witness. Under his leadership this long standing dialogue produced some of the finest ecumenical documents of the twentieth century.

McDonnell's research, based on scripture and the early writers, has focused on ecumenism, the nature of the church, Trinity, pneumatology and the charisms. His scholarly work has contributed a great deal toward the development of an ecumenical theology of the Holy Spirit. He could have rested on his laurels.

However, at the age of seventy-five, McDonnell began writing poetry. The vocational turn from systematic theology to the creative side was somewhat disconcerting, causing him to ponder: "Could a seventy-five-year old man shift to the less logical, more meta-phorical, evocative mode and become a competent poet?"²

He should not have worried. Anyone knowing Kilian would agree that his life reflects the lyrical beauty of a poet more than the rigid stance of a dogmatist. Maybe that is why he got along so well with us Pentecostals. We are less interested in dogmatic questions than in experiences of the Word of God. It could be that we drove him to poetry, testing the limits of reason as we are often prone to do.

McDonnell's poetry reflects his seventy-five year journey as a monk, seeking God in a monastery. This journey is chronicled in two books of poetry: *Swift Lord, You Are Not*³ and *Yahweh's Other Shoe*.⁴ (See ad in this issue.)

Such a journey is not for the timid of heart. For that reason, Fr. Kilian understands the central metaphor of the monastic experience to be the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with God (Genesis 32:22-32). He notes: "To a large extent my poetry, personal, but not private, is about this sweaty wrestling with God, coping with the discipline of the search for God—or waiting for God."⁵ Begging God to speak, pleading for one unambiguous touch, McDonnell's poems are deeply personal, but full of gracious hospitality, inviting all of us to bring our own struggles into the fray:

Must You Mumble?

(Then the Lord came and stood there calling
"Samuel, Samuel." 1Samuel 3:10)

Speak, Lord, your servant listens.
Now, how about a straight word?

No more Ezekiel prophecies,
wheels within wheels.

It is not enough to drag
the hem of your garment

in the sand of Miami's beach
so I can read its scratchings.

Though I'm a Minnesota groundling,
I do not need the clarity

of Greek necessity. But no more
shadows on the cavern walls.

You are always turning off the lights,
blowing out the single candle.

Please, no more muttering
in your beer, like some dark Luther,
caught between the impossibilities
of law and the freedom of the Gospel.

I just need some stay
against the cosmic dust

as I drag the bag of my illusions
along the street of my ineptitude.

Try a little logic on the universe.
Steady, please, Oh God of iron whim.

I ask no Mount Sinais, no Tabors,
no cloud by day, no fire by night,

just one unambiguous touch
lasting one beat of my heart.⁶

Fr. Kilian's poetic stance as one who wrestles with God was inspired by two Old Testament theologians, Gerhard van Rad and Walter Brueggemann. "These two biblical scholars," observes McDonnell, "showed me how those who encountered God were engaged in a mighty struggle contending with God."⁷ Indeed, McDonnell's take on biblical characters reveals real people who "bear in their psyches the marks of both a new level of freedom and also remnants of a limp."⁸ His characters experience God, but yet are bound to the earth in all its finite confusion. Note his poem regarding the call of Abraham:

The Call of Abraham
Now the Lord said to Abram,
"Go from your country." Genesis 12:1

Talk about imperious.
Without a "may I presume?"
no previous contact,
no letter of introduction,
this unknown God
issues edicts.

This is not a conversation.

Am I a nobody
to receive decrees
from one whose name
I do not know?

At seventy-five I hear
“Go!” Am I supposed
to scuttle my life,
take that ancient wasteland, Sarai,
place my arthritic bones
upon the road
to some mumbled nowhere?

Let me get this straight.
I summarize.

In ten generations since the Flood
you have spoken to no one.
Now, like thunder on a clear day,
you give commands:
pull up my tent,
desert the graves of my ancestors,
for a country you do not name.

God of the wilderness,
from two desiccated lumps
you promise all peoples of the earth
will be blessed.

You come late, Lord, very late,
but my camels leave in the morning.⁹

For me the most surprising and delightful aspect of McDonnell’s poetry is his take on women. Who could have guessed that a Benedictine monk would know us so well? How did he know that deep down women are not nice? How could he imagine that we desire a robust and earthy spirituality that is able to handle the real world of blood, sweat and tears? In *Yahweh’s Other Shoe* a majority of the poems are devoted to biblical women such as Sarah, Deborah, Jael, Mary at Cana, Peter’s wife, and the woman at Jacob’s well. His take on these characters reveal a world of women who wage war, speak inconvenient truth, and drink deeply of heaven’s unsettling waters.

His poem, “Deborah, Lady Jael, and the Tent Peg,” while disturbing my nonviolent stance as a pacifist, reminds me of the warrior women preachers of my childhood:

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of
Lappidoth, was judging Israel. Judges 4:5

Iron’s the new Lord.

Older kings cast
their crowns before it. But Israel
hugs its dull bronze.
To the new, triumph in battle.
To the old, untidy death.

Deborah, no scrubber of pots,
but war strategist, prophetess
to whom all Israel comes
for judgment, sits beneath
the palm tree between Ramah
and Bethel. Her man cooks stew.

From the shade she summons
General Barak to stand
before her, receive her word:
By a woman' hand will
Yahweh deliver into your
hands all Sisera's uncircumcised

kings with their nine-hundred
iron chariots, nine-hundred
apocalyptic steeds breathing
hot death like robber
gods unleashing fire
upon our antique bronze.

What need have we of iron
wheels when Yahweh is our
general, fights beside us?
Go, hide in the leafy trees
on the high slopes of Mount
Tabor to view the land below.

I myself will draw the iron
chariots and all the kings
and princes of Sisera to the plain.
You will see rank on rank
of chariots poised for charge.
At my sign, your foot soldiers

will descend like hornets from Gehenna.
When all the kings and chariots
are ranged in battle line
below Mount Tabor, Deborah
shouts *Charge*. The black cloud
swarms down the slope

to chariots mired in the mud
Yahweh had made for Sisera.
The warrior flees on foot
to Lady Jael standing before
her tent tied to the terebinth tree.
She invites him to enter, offers

milk, bread, pillow,
covers him with a rug from Sidon.
Lady Jael drives a tent
peg through his head,
pins him to the ground.
And then he's dead.

Deborah shakes out her skirts,
returns to sit in the shade
of the palm tree between
Ramah and Bethel, giving
judgment to all Israel.
Lady Jael tidies up her tent.¹⁰

In the era of therapeutic preaching, it seems that few people limp away from our sermons. Perhaps we need to learn the lesson taught to me years ago by the warrior women preachers, namely that sometimes you have to wound in order to heal. The words of a limping monk may assist us toward that end. For Pentecost I recommend we start with "A Manual For Climbers":

("The love of God has been poured into our hearts through
the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Romans 5:5)
Surely, this is right.
One begins at the bottom,
like ascending the ladder
to conquer the fire.

One foot up, then the other.
No parachutes to the top,
no express elevator.
The faint need not apply.

God wrestled with primeval
darkness in the waters
of chaos. After seven days,
God rested. Not I.

To build muscle
I keep pumping iron.
If I stop to breathe,

I am back at the bottom.

After decades of climbing
I'm still on ground floor.
I had it all wrong.
You start at the top.¹¹

Notes

1 Clyde Francis Lytle, ed., *Leaves of Gold: An Anthology of Prayers, Memorable Phrases, Inspirational Verse and Prose* (Williamsport, Pennsylvania: The Coslett Publishing Company, 1938).

2 Kilian McDonnell, *Swift Lord, You Are Not* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Saint John's University Press, 2003), 106.

3 See above.

4 Kilian McDonnell, *Yahweh's Other Shoe* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Saint John's University Press, 2006).

5 "Must You Mumble," *Swift Lord, You Are Not*, 108.

6 McDonnell, "Must You Mumble?" *Swift Lord, You Are Not*, 20-21.

7 McDonnell, *Swift Lord, You Are Not*, 108.

8 Ibid.

9 "The Call of Abraham," *Swift, Lord, You Are Not*, 10-11.

10 "Deborah, Lady Jael, and the Tent Peg," *Yahweh's Other Shoe*, 10-12.

11 "A Manual for Climbers," *Swift Lord, You Are Not*, 57.

To read more poems about biblical characters, see www.saintjohnsabbey.org/mcdonnell/poetry.html