

Peace embodied: Lucius Weathersby

Isaiah 11:1-10

December 5, 2010

(Recording of "Variations on Nettleton," played by Lucius Weathersby)

Do you recognize the tune? It's the tune we just finished singing, the tune to "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing." It's an old American folk tune titled Nettleton, named for a early 19th century minister. The organist is Lucius Weathersby, playing an arrangement entitled, "Variations on Nettleton," by Undine S. Moore.

This recording was made as part of a CD project intended as a benefit for victims of Hurricane Katrina. "Proceeds from [the] project were [intended] to assist the church musicians of the Gulf Coast region who were affected by Katrina's devastation." In addition to the piece by Undine Moore, a female African-American composer of the last century, the project includes compositions by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Eric Sawyer, William Grant Still, Florence Price, and Fela Sowande.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was born in England of an English mother and a Sierra Leonean father. He was named for the English poet and was referred to by some as the "African Mahler." He died in 1912 at the age of thirty-seven.

Eric Sawyer is a professor of music at Amherst College. For this project, Lucius recorded a selection from his opera, "Our American Cousin," set in Ford's Theatre on the night President Lincoln was assassinated.

William Grant Still was a classical composer, known as the "dean" of African-American composers.

Florence Price was the first female African-American symphonic composer.

Fela Sowande was a Nigerian composer, who wrote for organ and orchestra and voice.

The project also includes a number of Lucius' own compositions: several improvisations, his "Iowa Winter Suite," and a new composition entitled, "New Orleans Suite," capturing the flavor of a New Orleans jazz funeral, beginning "with the slow, mournful sounds of ... 'Nearer My God to Thee' and 'Just a Closer Walk with Thee' and [concluding] with an outburst of joy and hope."

The project was undertaken in partnership with Hey Orgelbau, a renowned German organ builder, on instruments built by Hey Orgelbau in three different German cities. But the project was never completed. It was interrupted by Lucius' untimely death in March 2006, also at the age of thirty-seven, less than seven months after the Katrina disaster. The CD was never released, but you may download all of the recordings off the Hey Orgelbau website (http://www.hey-orgelbau.de/en/hurricane_benefit_cd_pipe_organ.htm).

Many of you knew Lucius Weathersby. You knew him much better than I did, because he left Waterloo just as I was arriving. Lucius was organist and director of music here at First Congregational United Church of Christ from 1990 to 1994. He played the organ, he directed our choirs and bell choirs, he was active in the community music scene, and he founded our congregational concert series.

Lucius was a very talented young man. He was a composer, an arranger, a performer, a conductor, a teacher. And he was an advocate, an advocate for overlooked musical genius, particularly among men and women sharing African roots. He was a co-founder and trustee of the International Consortium for the Music of African and Its Diaspora.

The African Musical Arts website marked his death with these words:

African Chorus and the International Consortium for the Music of Africa & its Diaspora mourn the passing of LUCIUS R. WEATHERSBY, PH.D. (1968-2006)

*That he was a consummate artist
There was no doubt.
But above all,
Lucius nurtured a burning passion
To use music as a vehicle
To bring people together ...*

To use music as a vehicle to bring people together! That's what it was all about for him: not just the music, but the people! The people who make the music and the people who listen to the music!

Why use music? Why use music to bring people together? Because it works! Music does bring people together. Music gives disparate people a common voice and a common bond. And because it was his. It's what he knew.

Lucius Weathersby embodied peace. During Advent, we are lighting candles of hope and peace and love and joy, but hope and peace and love and joy mean nothing unless they are embodied! Until hope becomes embodied, until peace

becomes a self-conscious way of life, until love shows itself in practical acts of selflessness and generosity, until joy sings in the midst of real hardship and real loss, these things mean nothing.

Lucius embodied peace. Peace was for him a self-conscious way of life. He was a peacemaker, but not in the sense we might usually think of -- a mediator, or an agent of conflict resolution, or a vocal proponent of some peace movement.

He was a peacemaker in the biblical sense -- an agent of reconciliation, a person who brings people together. This is the biblical vision of peace, a vision of reconciliation: wolves and sheep living together, cows and bears and calves and lion cubs eating side by side, babies playing with snakes. The biblical vision of peace is about repairing broken relationships, about overcoming longstanding divisions, about bringing people together, about bringing creation together.

Lucius brought people together through his music. That's why I took the time to list for you the composers selected for the Katrina benefit CD. They are men and women, African-Americans and Euro-Americans and Afro-Europeans and a Nigerian, all on a recording produced by Germans for the sake of American Gulf Coast church musicians!

Who else could have made this happen? Who else could have brought such a group together for such a purpose? With his music, by his own efforts, in his own body, Lucius bridged otherwise unbridged divides of culture and race and musical style.

Lucius brought people together through his music, and he brought people together simply because of who he was. He was a gentle, endearing, affable, gracious, humble man. He made friends ... everywhere!

He was a living embodiment of reconciliation, a living bridge between races and cultures, a African-American from Many, Louisiana, living and working in a milieu dominated by white Europeans, finding a home, making a home, in Waterloo, Iowa, and Phoenix, Arizona, in Amherst, Massachusetts, and Mellrichstadt, Germany. You know how well he was loved here! And I am sure he was loved no less wherever he went.

Lucius embodied peace, peace in the biblical sense.

We often think of peace in negative terms: peace as the absence of conflict, as cessation of hostilities, as freedom from threat, as a state of calm and of assured security that allows us to pursue our own lives as we wish. Peace is

about securing and protecting the life we already have, as we already have it, where we already have it, with whom we already share it.

But the Bible speaks of peace in positive terms. Peace is about bringing something new into being. Peace is about taking us out of our comfort zones into a new reality. Peace is about establishing new relationships where none existed before. Peace is about establishing new relationships where none were wanted before. Peace is about breaking down the walls that separate people from people. Peace is about breaking down the walls that separate people from God

Listen once more as Isaiah talks about God's vision of peace:

*Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,
and leopards will lie down with young goats.
Calves and lion cubs will feed together,
and little children will take care of them.
Cows and bears will eat together,
and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.
Lions will eat straw as cattle do.
Even a baby will not be harmed
if it plays near a poisonous snake.*

This peace is about seeing mortal enemies in a new light. This peace is about welcoming lifelong adversaries into our lives. This peace is about bringing outsiders inside. This peace is about overcoming fear ... with love.

God's peace is all about reconciliation, about bringing people together. This is the peace Lucius Weathersby embodied. His life was short, too short, but the ripple effects of his peacemaking continue still among us.

This is the peace Jesus embodied. He brought outsiders in, inviting sinners and outcasts to eat at his table and share the fellowship of the people of God. He refused to condemn men and women already branded as sinners, offering instead God's forgiveness and a new opportunity to change the course of their lives and to be reconciled to God. With his words and his actions, he made people see women and Samaritans, disabled people and poor people, in a new light, in God's light.

His own people, the Jews, were an oppressed people, an outcast people, a disempowered minority, but the peace Jesus brought them was not victory over their enemies or release from Roman oppression. He made them see the people they were oppressing, the people they were excluding, and brought peace by reconciling them to each other.

Jesus announced peace. Jesus brought peace. Jesus embodied peace.

How will you embody peace? How will you serve God as an agent of reconciliation? What are the walls you need to break down, the divides you need to bridge? Who are the people you need to see in a new light, the people you need to see in God's light?

And what will you use to make peace? Lucius used music, because it was his. You will use what is yours. You will use what God has already put in you. You will use your gift, your strength, your wisdom, your charm to bring people together, and that is how you will embody peace!