

# LIKE APPLES OF GOLD

August 15, 2010

Texts – Proverbs 25: 11 - 13

Philippians 4: 8 - 9

Antiques – they are an important part of summer for many people. Certainly they were in my family as I was growing up.

Our annual pilgrimage to Greensboro, Vermont from Summit, New Jersey was the high point of the year. For me it meant early mornings fishing on the fog-shrouded waters of Caspian Lake. My brother looked forward to swimming and sailing; my sister to horse-back riding. Our mother, however, had a different point of view – one more theological in nature. For her, life was defined not by the destination but by the nature of the journey. It was not Caspian Lake or Greensboro which she dreamed of coming to, but rather all the antique stores which stood between here and there.

We hit everyone of them, coming or going. The latter was always the more dangerous time. On our way north we seldom paused very long; I suppose we kids were just too antsy and anxious to be on our way. But going south, with nothing but New Jersey to look forward to, was another matter. One year we strapped a beaten up “deacons’ bench” to the top of our car. Another time we rode the eight hours home, five of us crammed into the car with a deteriorating Lincoln Rocker nestled in amongst us. There were enough chips of lead paint scattered around the back seat to make a toxic waste site.

I learned a lot from those frequent forays into the past, not the least of which was an appreciation of poetry. It seemed like every shop we went into had a little bit of it somewhere near the front door. One verse was repeated over and over. I memorized it: “Lovely to look at; wonderful to hold; but if your child breaks it, consider it sold!”

Mother, of course, was interested in furniture – something she could get her hands on; something she could refinish and use to decorate our home. My budget was considerably smaller than hers, so I focused on more refined items, like the bundled collections of old postcards and letters you could buy for \$5.

I secretly hoped, I guess, that I'd find something valuable in them – like an autograph of a famous person, or some reference to a great historical event, or perhaps a passionate love letter. I never did. What I found, instead, written in faded ink and grimy with the dust of decades, were snippets from the lives of ordinary people – stories of trips taken, parties and picnics enjoyed, laments about the weather, tales of children growing older. Rarely were they in any kind of order, but it was enough to get a young boy's imagination going about who those anonymous authors were and what their lives were really like.

Arthur Gordon was a man who shared my fascination with such historical trivia. Many years ago he told of pouring through a stack of old letters in the attic of his family's ancestral home.<sup>1</sup> “They might almost have been written by my sisters to me, or vice versa,” he says, “except for one thing – The emotional restraints that have become part of our daily lives were largely lacking back then.” He quotes a number of them to illustrate his point:

*You don't know how much your visit meant to each of us! one says. When you left, I felt as if the sun had stopped shining.*

Another reads:

*The courage with which you are facing your difficulties is an inspiration to all of us.*

*We haven't the slightest doubt that in the end you will triumph over all of them.*

A third says:

*Have I told you lately what a wonderful person you are? Never forget how much*

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Gordon, A Touch of Wonder (Guideposts Associates, Inc, 1974), pp. 49-54.

*your friends and family love and admire you.*

Effusive, aren't they? These people cared about one another enormously and intimately, as we do, but they gave voice to those feelings more often than we. Oh, no doubt, in each there must have been much that could have been criticized. But over and over, in a hundred different ways, these old letters speak of their love and admiration for one another. To our modern ears their words sound naive or syrupy. We are more restrained, reserved. We value one another just as much, but somewhere along the line we have decided it is corny or foolish to give utterance to such feelings. The result is that many have lost something our forebears enjoyed, namely – the knowledge that we are loved and accepted.

It's no small thing, is it? If you know and are frequently reminded that you are loved, you don't really have to worry about acceptance or approval . . . you've already got them. Knowing that you are admired, your self-confidence remains high. If others are bold enough to tell you of their confidence in your ability to cope with difficulties, then the fear of failure recedes. The opposite, however, is also true.

You become what you think you are, some people say. But what you think you are is colored, isn't it, by what others say about you. If they are critical, or even just indifferent, your self-esteem shrinks, and with it shrinks your capacity for living. Some criticism, of course, is healthy and good, but too much can be a subtle poison.

I love the story of the brilliant young men who formed a literature club at the University of Wisconsin many years ago. At each of their meetings, one of them would read a story or an essay he had written and submit it to the criticism of his peers. No punches were pulled; each manuscript was mercilessly dissected. The sessions were so brutal that the club members eventually called themselves "The Stranglers."

Did I say only young men were allowed into the club? Well, they were. Their female

contemporaries, however, were not to be out done. They formed their own group and called themselves “The Wranglers.” They, too, read their manuscripts out loud. But the criticisms they shared were much gentler. In fact, there was almost none at all. The Wranglers hunted for kind things to say. All efforts, no matter how feeble, were encouraged.

Twenty years later, an alum made an analysis of his classmates’ careers. Not one of the young men in “The Stranglers” club had established a literary reputation. Out of “The Wranglers,” however, had come half a dozen successful writers, some of national prominence.

Two groups of highly talented young people; two very different outcomes. Coincidence? Hardly. The Wranglers gave one another a lift; the Stranglers promoted self-criticism, self-doubt. In choosing a name for themselves, they had been wiser than they knew.

Of course there is nothing new about any of this. It is at least as old as this old book. “*A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver,*” Proverbs says [Proverbs 25: 11]. “*A new commandment I give you, that you love one another,*” Jesus said. “*What you sow, that also shall you reap,*” he said another time. “*The judgment you give shall be the judgment you get.*” In these and countless other passages, the premise is stated that there are consequences in life to the actions we take and to the words which we speak or fail to speak.

We know beyond a doubt that human affection – love – has the power to unlock enormous human capabilities. But such affection is not much good unless it is expressed. Putting an emotion into words gives it a life and a reality which it otherwise does not have.

Remembering those old letters from generations past, I wonder – have we lost something? *How wonderful you are . . . . Never forget how much you are loved and admired.* Why do such phrases so seldom appear in our correspondence, let alone in our conversations? What are we afraid of? What have we lost?

“Our chief want in life,” Emerson wrote, “is somebody who shall make us do what we

can.” He might have added – “and who will remind us of how much potential we have.” Don’t we need that? I do; do you?

All of which means, I guess, that my mother was right after all – life is not about the destination but the journey. There are real treasures to be found even in antique shops. They may not be “*like apples of gold in a setting of silver,*” and the poetry may leave something to be desired, but the praise in the prose is without price. Let us practice it more. Amen.