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A Masterpiece of Faith

By Reverend Clay Lein

A COUPLE YEARS AGO I went to Salisbury, England for a spiritual retreat. During the week I was able to worship in one of the oldest and tallest cathedrals in Europe (pre 1300s). It really was sacred space.

One night I sat next to a fellow named Harold as the choir sang Evensong. He was an older gentleman, slow moving, quite deliberate and free with a smile. The thing I noticed immediately about Harold was that he knew when to stand, when to kneel and when to sit. As I searched the service books to keep up, he repeated the words from memory. Harold obviously knew what he was doing.

When the service was over and all the

people had filed out Harold and I stayed, sitting among the centuries-old carved pews. He began to tell me about his retired life. All his life he had taught music – especially organ. For the last two years he had been living here on the grounds of the cathedral in a house more than 250 years old. This cathedral was his home. He went to morning prayers and evening prayers and everything in between. He knew the services because they had become a part of him.

Harold told me much about the cathedral and the music. He bragged about the choir and the building, but he was especially excited about the organ. His eyes lit up. “It’s a Father Willis organ,” he

said. That must have meant something and so I nodded. Then he told me that he’d never played it.

I was surprised and asked, “Never?”

“No” was his simple reply.

Being a typical American I said, “Would you like me to go ask the Dean for permission?”

He being typically English was aghast that I’d be so bold. “Oh, no. Thank you.”

Afterwards, as I walked home in the dark mist, I wondered how such an odd thing could happen. Here was a man who had been performing on the organ all his life and he was living next door to one of the best organs in England. Harold could have made any set of pipes a masterpiece and yet he had never touched these. It seemed a tragic irony, so close and yet so far away.

And yet the same tragic irony exists in the lives of so many people right here at home—people, busy doing the daily life stuff and forgetting that there is a spiritual masterpiece in them waiting to be played. We do that so often because we keep faith at arms length. We’re skeptical, unsure or we don’t have the time. So we don’t hear the music that could be played in our lives.

Typically American, I’d like to solve the problem. Can I cajole you into playing? Can I convince you to touch the keys? Can I ask someone for permission that you would finally play?

But it doesn’t work that way, does it? I can’t make Harold play that Salisbury organ. I can only choose for one, for me. And each day I need to make my choice to play. And everyday I pray that it may be a masterpiece worthy of any cathedral.

But I can hope, can’t I? I can hope that someday Harold will sit at those banks of wood and ivory keys, place his hands upon them and begin to play the songs of the masters. I can also hope that the timid in faith would one day step out in boldness and discover that the greatest masterpiece of all is a faith embraced and lived. Want to play?

Reverend Clay Lein is the senior pastor at St. Phillips Episcopal Church.