

The Whole World in Our Hands (Summer Saints Series: The Packhorse Library Project)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 30, 2024
Friendship Presbyterian Church

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:31-40, NRSV)

You know that old spiritual “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands”?

*He's got the whole world in His hands [X3] ...
He's got the whole world in His hands.
He's got the wind and the rain in His hands ...
He's got the tiny little baby in His hands ...
He's got you and me brother (you and me sister) in His hands ...
He's got everybody here in His hands ...
He's got the whole world in His hands.*

The song certainly speaks to the providential love and care of God, but also at a deeper level to the *engagement* that God has with the world ... how God’s own heart beats with the world and responds to the world, and in some ways *experiences* the world *through us* and our own response to it. Almost like a book being read and cherished, creation reveals its secrets back to the one who holds it and loves it. God’s own intimacy with creation is deepened through holding it all – and holding all of us thinking, feeling, loving creatures – in his hands.

As those who are, as the scriptures teach us, created in the *image* of God, we can know something of this mystery in the simple act of picking up a good book and reading it, for in doing so, we look into the souls of others, and travel to new places, and think new thoughts ... We experience as in no other way possible the mystery of the human heart, and we see through others’ eyes. The great contemporary fantasy writer George R.R. Martin put it so well when he said, “A reader lives a *thousand* lives before he dies. The [one] who never reads lives only one.” When you hold and savor a good book, you’ve truly got the whole world in your hands.

This is why I am so glad that Kevin suggested this “Summer Saint” focus for today. You all probably know that over the last six years, and especially over the last two or so, the selections have been a true collaboration between the two of us, with others’ input as well, the result being some of *my* old favorites (like, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson) alongside Dori Allen’s suggestion of Clara Maass (our focus of last week), and now this week, the Packhorse Library Project.

Obviously, this choice is a departure from our usual sort, in that this “Summer Saint” is not a single person, but rather a *group*, mostly of women – a unique initiative established in the mid-1930’s as part of President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (the “WPA”) to combat the Great Depression and put people back to work. It was active in the Appalachian region of Kentucky between 1935 and 1943, and brought the gifts of books and literacy to some of the country’s poorest rural communities. Its story is a relatively obscure part of the American past but makes for a wonderful part of our history, with implications and significance still today.

The Packhorse Library Project was born out of this dire need for educational resources in a time of intense hardship. Many communities in Kentucky were so isolated that even basic services were hard to come by. Schools were few and far between, and the literacy rate was alarmingly low. Recognizing the importance of education and literacy in improving people’s lives, the federal government funded the project as part of its broader efforts to create jobs and stimulate the economy.

The project operated out of approximately 30 central libraries and collection centers across eastern Kentucky, in counties such as Breathitt, Knott, Leslie, Perry, and Harlan. These locations were chosen based on the density of the population and the level of isolation, ensuring maximum reach, and were often set up in existing institutions like schools, post offices, or community centers. These centers served as hubs for book collection, cataloguing, and distribution. Donations came from various sources, including established libraries, publishers, and private citizens.

The “packhorse” part of all this refers to the delivery of the books from the centers into these isolated communities, and almost all of this delivery was accomplished by women. They were typically local residents, familiar with the challenging terrain, who were hired and trained by the WPA and paid a small salary. These packhorse librarians would load up saddlebags with books, mount their horses or mules, and set out, often traveling over 100 miles a week through difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, including inclement weather and rugged landscapes, to deliver reading materials to families, schools, and remote communities.

The routes varied, of course, but each librarian had a specific circuit and offered a wide range of reading materials, including classic literature, children’s books, Bibles, practical guides, magazines, newspapers, and even handmade books. Some of the women even created scrapbooks filled with clippings, recipes, and articles, making the content more relevant and engaging for the local people.

Just like ordinary libraries as we know them, the materials were lent out for a period, after which the book women would collect them and redistribute to other families and communities. This circulation method ensured that all reading materials reached as wide an audience as possible.

But you know they brought more than just books! By providing such access, the project helped to increase literacy rates and foster a love of reading among children and adults alike. For many families, the arrival of the packhorse librarian was a highly anticipated event, helping to build a sense of community and shared purpose, and the books they brought were treasured and read multiple times. In these and other ways, these Packhorse librarians brought something truly profound, and something in short supply in those desperate times: *Hope*, and a sense of connection to the wider world.

The *personal* connections that packhorse librarians forged with the communities they served were a story in themselves. The women often went beyond their official duties, helping children with their homework, teaching adults to read, and providing comfort and companionship to isolated families. And in the mysterious logic of the Kingdom of God, their works of compassion and love had a ripple effect, inspiring a love of reading and learning that has lasted for generations. Many children who benefited from the Packhorse Library Project would grow up to become teachers, community leaders, and advocates for literacy, perpetuating the legacy of these tireless women, whose own names are lost to the obscurity of history, but who in myriad ways had such a profound impact on so many lives, and so quietly changed the world.

The Packhorse Library Project ended in 1943 as the WPA was phased out and the country further mobilized during World War II, but its legacy does live on still. Many of the communities that had been served by packhorse librarians went on to establish permanent libraries, inspired by the value and importance of having access to books. The Project is rightly remembered today as a testament to the transformative power of literacy and the resilience of the human spirit. The dedication of the packhorse librarians, who tirelessly worked to bring knowledge and joy to some of the nation's most isolated communities, continues to inspire those committed to improving access to quality education for all.

In our gospel reading for today, we recall those words of Jesus in which he envisions the King of Glory speaking to the redeemed at the end of the age, welcoming them into the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world, and telling them,

*... I was hungry, and you gave me food,
I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink,
I was a stranger, and you welcomed me,
I was naked, and you gave me clothing,
I was sick, and you took care of me,
I was in prison, and you visited me.*

We rightly see this passage at the heart of the gospel's claim on us: that what we do for "the least of these" we do for Christ himself ... that the gifts we offer those in need of food and drink, of shelter, clothing, care, and concern are *simple* gifts, yes, but with eternal impact. And it's time we see those who offer the gift of *reading* – whether librarians on horseback or behind a counter, or teachers in front of a classroom, or parents by a bedside – it's time we see these all as standing in this same line of simple acts of love that are acts of love toward God.

C.S. Lewis once said, "We read to know that we're not alone." And indeed, the great *gift* that such servants of God as we have been lifting up offer is a *vision* – a vision of connection, a vision of a larger world that, for all its pain, is also a wondrous place with room for everyone. It is by the simple gift of access to books and reading that

- A young boy, like I once was, can explore the outer limits of his imagination ...
- A young girl can conceive a future in which she becomes a doctor, or businesswoman, or *whatever she* wants to be ...
- An ordinary man or woman, crippled by a sense of helplessness, can find the inspiration and courage to launch a movement ...
- A struggling teen who experiences feelings they don't understand, who are told that who and what they are is somehow wrong, can find that they are not alone, that they are not a mistake, and that they *are* worthy of love.

Yes, the packhorse librarians of yesteryear opened up worlds of knowledge, imagination, and possibility, and their heirs today continue their sacred work in a hundred thousand ways and places, usually unheralded, often underpaid, and most certainly underappreciated. But I'm certain that they too are doing the work of the kingdom, whether they know it or not, and that the Spirit even now would whisper to them all –

*I was hungry for knowledge, and you fed my mind ...
I was thirsty for wisdom, and you enriched my soul ...
I was a stranger to the world, and you welcomed me into a much larger one ...
I was defenseless against what I was told, and you gave me tools to think for myself ...
I was sick and weak from false narratives, and you cared enough to see that I learned new stories that endowed me with dignity and purpose ...
I was in a prison of my own preconceptions, and you shared others' lives and thoughts with me, and so set me free –*

You put the whole world in my hands - to the glory of God! Amen.