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**Gilbert Meilaender. *Love Taking Shape, Sermons on the Christian Life*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2002. Pp. 143. \$15.00 (Paper).**

[1] *Love Taking Shape* is a collection of short sermons - homilies really - by Gilbert Meilaender. Meilaender is the Duesenberg Professor of Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University. He teaches Christian ethics and moral issues. This book arises out of sermons he has preached, generally to Lutheran congregations. As the author notes, "They are my attempt to preach about what I also teach" (xi). The publisher advertises the book as "a gathering of earthly, passionate sermons intended for all Christians as they attempt to think through the meaning and requirements of a life of love that is obedient to God's command and follows Christ."

[2] *Love Taking Shape* is comprised of five sections each containing between four and six sermons pertinent to the overall section topic. This book may be the exception to the rule, "Sermonettes make Christianettes." While the sermons are short in length, usually no more than four or five pages, they get to the point quickly. These are not expository sermons designed to convert non-believers. They are encouraging messages to challenge the believer in Christ to deepen his or her walk on the basis of a growing character of love. While thoroughly thought provoking, there is not always an explicit Christian message. Yet, the author hints to the person and work of Jesus Christ throughout the book. Each sermon is written as if being spoken, because, as Meilaender notes, "preaching has its own cadence, not bound by our normal rules of punctuation" (xii). Each of the five sections has an introduction. The reader is given the foundation and inspiration behind each message. Some come to us as a series of messages around a theme; Lent and the Decalog; and others are random and varying such as "Love as a Tangent toward Eternity in 'Time'" (121). Being a short book, it is hard to give the meat of the sermons without giving away all the nutrients of the book. A brief look into several of the topics may whet the appetite of the reader to want to pursue this collection completely.

[3] "Buried with Christ: Homilies for Lent" is the title of section one. This series of five homilies has the sixth chapter of Paul's letter to the Church at Rome as its basis. Picking a key word or theme from the passage, Meilaender constructs each sermon around a question

from Luther's Small Catechism. Each homily builds upon the previous one and can be seen in the light of a total Lenten series. The author uses language to engage the senses and make each vignette vivid. Regarding the water of baptism, he writes, "And here, in this world of bodies, God meets us and touches us with something we can see and feel and taste - with the water of our baptism" (6). The reader, like the listener, cannot help but recall or imagine the sensation the author speaks of. The use of this language draws you in and makes the whole scene come alive and present as if it were happening to you right here, right now. Like an ever heightening crescendo, this section ends with a sermon on life. "Day by day, day after day, the new self can live - live as God wills, live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (21). One can feel the excitement Christians are supposed to have after Lent on that glorious Easter morning: life as God intended it and as Jesus bought for us.

[4] Section Two has six sermons titled "The Bonds of Life - Sermons on the Decalog." This is a group of sermons about the Ten Commandments - the Decalog. It ends with the Great Commandment from Matthew 22. Here, Meilaender pursues "not only their negative prohibitions but also the works of love they urge upon us" (24). Most people have not heard sermons pointing to love in the Decalog. This unique position allows the reader to see that God did not prohibit certain actions just to be a killjoy. God had a purpose in each command that is positive and uplifting for the whole community. When people practice what God asks, their lives will be in harmony with God and one another. Meilaender sums this up, just as Jesus did, in the selection from Matthew. "The more seriously we take the command to love God, the more earnestly we understand it is our created destiny, the more we will be driven to speak also of faith" (55).

[5] Section Three brings us four sermons on the theme "Life in the Kingdom: Sermons on the Sermon on the Mount." Using Matthew, chapter five, the writer helps us see into the quality of love our lives must possess if we are to truly be Kingdom people. "I read the 'hard sayings' of Matthew 5 not only as an impossible demand, which exposes our need for pardon, but also as the promise of new birth in the Spirit of the risen Lord" (61). The characteristic of this life of love is vulnerability. "In short - to love as he (Jesus) would have us love is to be vulnerable" (80). The sermon "Vulnerable Love" is very timely. It may even persuade some people to change their minds about going to war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq. "He does not require that we never use force, if force is necessary to defend neighbors in need or innocent victims" (81). But, vulnerable love is needed in our everyday lives also. "I may think God ought to give you what you have coming, but I don't really want him to treat me that way" (83). This is a profound statement concerning our inner most thoughts that are hard for some people to admit. The answer of course is to "be vulnerable, as your heavenly Father is vulnerable" (84).

[6] *Love Taking Shape* moves from kingdom issues to social issues. In Section Four, Meilaender offers six sermons of differing content based on the theme of "Love Taking Shape in Time." The author gives very compelling points of view on abortion, marriage, work, homeland and death. "Fellow Fetuses" is an Epiphany homily first published in 1998 in the *Lutheran Forum*. It is gripping and may cause an abortion ally to question his or her belief. "We are arguing about whose good counts in the common good we share." (88) Meilaender offers an insight into God's perspective on this subject. "The presence of children is a sign of God's continuing 'yes' to his creation, testimony that he will not

withdraw from time and history in which he has become incarnate" (90). This kind of statement may possibly quiet even the "prayerfully pro-choice" crowd. For, if abortion had been option 2000 years ago, Jesus himself may have become a victim of abortion to end an inconvenient pregnancy. Couple this sermon with "Love Abides" on marriage, and any pastor could have several sessions of pre-marriage counseling covered.

[7] Section Five, "Love as a Tangent toward Eternity in Time," concludes with three sermons. This is a mouthful as far as chapter titles go, and the title is a little confusing. The definition of a tangent is: "touching; touching at one point only and not intersecting." This makes understanding the title difficult, especially for people who are visually oriented. The sermons offer variety for the reader. "Loving the Neighbor in God" is a tale of Charles and the Great King. Much like the lessons that Jesus taught, the moral of the story is plain and clear. "It is only possible for him (Charles) to love the king too little. The Great King does not need him. But Charles needs the king" (127). No matter what the setting, this story points out the neglect in all our lives. It is even more convicting for those who claim to be followers of Jesus! Meilaender then reverts back to childhood preoccupations and brings the Lone Ranger into the sermon "Return with Us Now to Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear." Although this sermon may contain dated material, for those old enough to remember, it enables one to see that maybe the Lone Ranger was engaged in a cosmic battle one did not even comprehend. Finally, the author does battle with Stoicism in a sermon for All Saint's Day. This sermon seeks to shatter the individualistic mentality so prevalent in our society today. The author pointedly notes, "For what the Stoic wants, self-sufficiency and dependence on no one, the Christian calls hell" (140).

[8] In conclusion, *Love Taking Shape* is worth reading. It does not qualify as scholarly, but it is insightful. There are no deep philosophical landmines to wade through. If you are looking for long expository sermons, look elsewhere. There are just 143 pages of good advice for living out the Christian life in love. The book offers useful sermon illustrations for pastors and comfort and encouragement for others. All in all, as a seminary student, and future pastor, I am glad to add *Love Taking Shape* to my library.

Vern Caswell