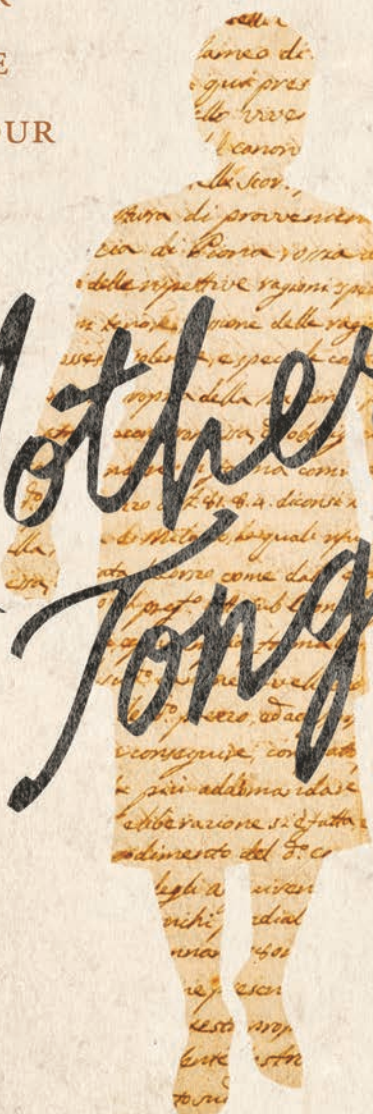


HOW OUR
HERITAGE
SHAPES OUR
STORY



Mother Tongue

LEONARD
SWEET

Len Sweet knows the power of the phrase, “Once upon a time . . .” When people hear these words they awake from their slumber, come to the edge of their seats, tuck the palms of their hands under their chins, and listen. This book did that for me. I was drawn into the wonderful, unique story of Len’s mother and family without the expectation of there being anything in it for me. Boy was I wrong.

RANDY FRAZEE

Author of *The Heart of the Story*

Leonard Sweet has long been one of my favorite people, and now I know why. Mabel Boggs Sweet. *Mother Tongue*, a spoken portrait of his mother—a woman of simple faith met with the strength, resiliency, and closeness to nature her mountain upbringing provided—is beautifully written, resounding with love and gratitude.

LISA SAMSON

Novelist and artist

If anyone ever wondered about the sacred and sacrificial art of Christian mothering joined with the divine calling to put Christ first in all things, meet Mabel Boggs Sweet. The stark stories of her life as a mother, shunned and poor, are contrasts to her extraordinary ability to live her life all for Christ. Thank you, Len Sweet, for telling us about your mother. She surely did cast a long shadow, and now we can sit in it, be encouraged, and learn.

MARYKATE MORSE

Professor of leadership and spiritual formation,
George Fox Evangelical Seminary

A treasure trove of life lessons and secrets that Len's mom left behind for him and his brothers (and now you and me) as a legacy to grow on. Len's sheer brilliance in making applications of the metaphors and meaning behind his mom's legacy in relation to the gospel and the history of the church enables him to seamlessly lace the two together in a rich and luxurious feast at Christ's table. Enjoy the banquet!

MARK J. CHIRONNA

Bishop of Church on the Living Edge

Had I known Mabel Boggs Sweet in the flesh, I would have been in awe of her. Even on the page, she stuns me. Gritty and outspoken, she was a gifted preacher and a frustrated feminist. Her favorite teacher was the Bible, and yet she firmly believed everyone had something to teach her. While Jesus was the unchanging center of her life, her faith was strong enough to embrace mystery. A gorgeous tribute to her, *Mother Tongue* is both moving and entertaining. I thoroughly enjoyed it!

LYNNE HYBELS


Author of *Nice Girls Don't Change the World*

A treasure of metaphor and story from the voice of a mother who birthed and raised a prolific theologian. You can hear her voice, see her fire, and appreciate the passion and power she had to love boldly and stand in the face of great odds. You will want to sit at the feet of this woman.

REV. DR. DOTTIE ESCOBEDO-FRANK

District superintendent, United Methodist Church

HOW OUR
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SHAPES OUR
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Mother
Tongue

LEONARD
SWEET

NAVPRESS 

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Mother Tongue: How Our Heritage Shapes Our Story

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am often called a “trend-spotter.” I hate that. I see myself as someone who rummages around in the attic of Christianity as part of a rescue operation for the obscure and forgotten. There is nothing so exciting as the discovery of artefacts and practices, rituals and images that we forgot we had. I am unimpressed by reputation, but I am impressed by the potential of the “left behind” to point to Jesus’ healing power in people’s lives, to reveal stories and images that tell us more about God’s world and Jesus’ saving grace, and to animate Jesus’ presence in our lives and the world. Metaphors do that for us. In other words, I run a homeless shelter and orphanage for lost stories and abandoned images. In this book I take you on a personal tour of the mementos that formed my faith, especially as a “PK” where the “preacher” was my mother.

My greatest wealth is my childhood. I am the oldest of three boys, born as close in age as possible for what today would be called “geriatric pregnancies.” As you can imagine, the Sweet household was not always high in GDP (Gross Domestic Peace) with Leonard Ira, Philip Dale, and John David running about.

Though I was the eldest, my parents never let any of the

three of us feel that I was the “firstborn” while they were the “after-borns.” In many ways, just the opposite was true, as Mother’s avowed favorite (“for theological reasons”) was the “youngest.” We were the “three musketeers”—united in brotherhood. Yet there were many times when my brothers and I resembled less “brotherly love” than “desperados.”

Sometimes we were desperados against notoriously strict parents. Sometimes we formed ad hoc desperado alliances against a brother or a cousin. Far from a “mum-with-oldest-son” thing, I was a lone desperado as a teenager, rebelling the most openly and vocally against parental tyranny, which made everyone shake their heads in disbelief when I took Mother into my home and cared for her in the last eleven years of her life. In short, conflict is as much a part of family relationships, including the Sweet family’s, as harmony is. It’s a fine line that separates blood brothers from bloody desperados.

Like so much of every childhood, mine is half remembered, half imagined. I have sent copies of the chapters that follow to my desperado brothers, Phil and John. This is in part to resist what Mark Twain said about *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: “Mostly a true book, with some stretchers.” It is amazing how three brothers can grow up in the same household, have the same experiences together, and live in different worlds. Some of what Phil and John remember never even made it into my consciousness. Phil thinks some of what I remember was only a dream he had once. John, who comes the closest to having total recall, has no

memory whatsoever of some of it. We were shaped by common events, but those “common events” sometimes had exactly opposite impacts on each of us. As an expression of my gratitude for their help in writing this book, I dedicate it to my two brothers.

Writing this book was a true “soul tsunami.” When the seismic shocks on my soul almost became too much to bear, Teri Hyrkas seemed always to sense I needed her shots of *spizzerinctum* to keep me on my quest. Lori Wagner read every word here multiple times and always found new ways for me to open Mother’s memory box and to mix and mingle my own story with her journals, artefacts, and biblical notations.

Elizabeth forced me to come to terms with certain features of my growing up as only a wife could. For example, Mother believed that boys should be able to have dolls just as girls do. So each of us had toy guns (which we could never point at a person), but we also had a “companion”—something I had suppressed. When we were very little, my brothers and I would dress and undress in Mother’s clothes and use the staircase as our catwalk without any accusation of silliness (a word that used to mean “holy,” by the way) by parents who enjoyed the “worldly show.” I mention it here so I don’t have to mention it in the book itself, hoping most people don’t read the acknowledgments.

My editor David Zimmerman, who is one of the humblest people you’ll ever meet, is someone Mother would have adopted as her fourth boy. David doesn’t know how

good he is, which Mother would have loved. She believed that self-praise is another word for boasting is another word for body odor. In a world where BO is the new cologne, Mother believed that self-deprecating humor was the best deodorant. She would have loved the smell of David Zimmerman.

This book fits no known genre or category, something that runs like an *obligato* across the story of Mother's life. If NavPress publisher Don Pape had not believed in this book and my agent Mark Sweeney hadn't been convinced that hybridity could be holy, this book would not be in your hands right now.

Every generation has a “good ol’ times” delusion. For Mother the “good ol’ times” were in the future. I am proud to be my mother's son, and I have written this book so that our kids and their kids, even though they may not have known Mabel Velma Boggs Sweet, will be proud to be her descendants—Leonard Jr., Justin, Thane, Soren, Egil, Joshua, Zachary, Sarah, Matthias, Nikolas, Caden, Conor, Lucas, Ellie, James, Angelina, Asher, and Gabriel. That's fourteen boys and four of the strongest women you'll ever meet. Mother's heritage continues.

Leonard Sweet
Thanksgiving Day, 2016

INTRODUCTION

From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did.

ROMANS 6:11, MSG

Mothers cast long, long shadows. Mark Twain famously told would-be authors to “write what you know.” I have never taken that advice, preferring to write about what I don’t know so that in the process of writing I can reduce my ignorance. But in this book I am living out Twain’s dictum. I am writing what I know: my mother, Mabel Boggs Sweet (20 March 1912–26 July 1993).¹

To my everlasting shame, I never fully appreciated Mother when she was alive. But this book is more than an offering on the altar of mea culpa. It is my attempt to give Mother—fiery holiness preacher, passionate follower of Jesus, and driven woman before her time—a voice. It’s an exercise in literary ventriloquism, a jointly authored act of collaboration

between the living and the dead. In these pages, I consort with my mother's words and add a quantity of my own—the only time I could get, you might say, a word in edgewise. As such, it is part memoir, part dialogue with ancestors and descendants, part theological reverie, part devotional, and part window into the material culture of the world of an evangelical empire that died in my lifetime. It is based on the belief that we each will be judged, not by where we end up but by how far we have come from where we started—while staying in, not straying from or entirely repudiating, our origins.

I am telling Mother's story by means of what I call the keyhole method of theology: Peer through a narrow aperture to see the whole; find in the particular the best path to the universal. The small hole in the fence is what best opens up the big picture, big concepts, big mysteries, big possibilities, big stories, big insights, big truths, big introductions to other worlds. I learned this methodology from the Arcades Project of the German philosopher and Jewish cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), who exhorted the historian to “discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.”² A whole life can be examined synecdochically through a bowl or a chair or a book or a key. I have also learned this from the comedies of Jerry Seinfeld and the novels and essays of Nicholson Baker, both of which showcase how the mundane details and minute things of life prove a remarkably rich source of pleasure and comedy and insight.

I have chosen twenty-four keyholes to ponder. Each keyhole is an arcane artefact. Let me explain what I mean by those three words: *ponder*, *arcane*, and *artefact*.

First, *arcane*. *Arcane* comes from the Latin *arca*, signifying a chest in which something special is locked away. Our “arcanum” is a treasure box where life’s most precious secrets are kept and where ordinary things are infused with metaphysical significance by something called “pondering.” In the “arcane” cubbyholes of life, some things become “transparent things” (to use the title of Nabokov’s late novella);³ something like a touch or a smell of a thing comes to carry time itself. Kenneth Clark suggests that there are two kinds of collectors: “those who aim at completing a series, and those who long to possess things that have bewitched them.”⁴ He missed a third: those who bring something back, who open up the arcane to mark a memory and store a story. We all are that third kind of “collector”: acquisitive connoisseurs of stories. The best gifts are our “arcana,” our used items, heirlooms haloed with memories, stuff “stuffed” with stories.

Second, *ponder*. The word *sunballousa* is Greek for “placing together for comparison,” which we translate as “ponder.”⁵ Luke’s Gospel says that Mary “treasured all these things in her heart.”⁶ What things? The angel Gabriel’s words. Cousin Elizabeth’s words. The shepherds’ words. The Scriptures’ words about the Messiah’s coming. Every evolving event, every new word, might yield more light to this astonishing unfolding. So Mary kept adding to her “arcanum,” to her

treasure store. She bundled all that was happening into a precious box. "Pondering" meant she unpacked the contents of that box over and over again and spread the items out on the table of her heart. Each time, she would arrange the pieces anew, placing the various elements in fresh configurations. One day she would, perhaps, place the shepherds' words beside a passage from a Hebrew prophet. The next day, she might place the shepherds' words beside the words of Gabriel. On the Sabbath day she might consider the shepherds' words as they related to Elizabeth's greeting. Mary reverently held each word to the light and compared it with the other treasures in her bag.⁷

*God is not in the business of preserving Calvinism, Methodism,
or any other "ism." God only must preserve Calvary.*

MABEL BOGGS SWEET

Third, *artefact*. Protestantism effected an estrangement between people and things, faith and artefacts. Lutheranism was not as energized about the role of imagery and iconography as Calvinism,⁸ a wing of the Reformation obsessed about false worship and anxious to drive people into the Word and away from distractions like the arts. Iconographic vandalism was part of early Calvinism's identity, and the dramatic outrageousness of much Baroque religious art is a reaction against Protestant iconoclasm. Evangelicalism is

still awash in Puritan whitewash, as exemplified in mega-church warehouses, barren of religious imagery, dotting the landscapes of suburbia.

To be sure, Christianity finds expression not only in intellectual forms (doctrines), visual forms (art), and ritual forms (liturgy) but also in material, tangible forms, while transcending all of these.⁹ There is no faith and no church but in things—at least no Christian faith or church. The greatest “object” in history is the body of Christ himself. We are taught to feel at one with a person, with a body, and to unite ourselves to a “thing,” an object, that is brought to life by another “thing,” the breath of the Spirit. Samuel Johnson, in the preface to his 1755 *Dictionary*, reminded his readers what he had learned after nine years of research into what some have called the greatest work of scholarship in Western history. “Words,” he writes, quoting an anonymous contemporary, “are the daughters of earth, and . . . things are the sons of heaven.”

Paul said that compared to “the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus,” everything else in life was but “rubbish,” or *skubalon* (really “sewage”).¹⁰ Yet we know that no one had a more incarnational sense of the presence of Christ or the sacramental nature of creation than Paul. All being is blessed. Nothing corporeal or material is alien to the divine. Our material environment is special to God. The false dichotomy between the material and the spiritual prevents us from seeing how the material is spiritual and the spiritual is material.

At the end of his second letter to Timothy, Paul asks for some *things*—some clothing and books (parchments, scrolls)—that he had left behind.¹¹ So “things” aren’t useless or “sewage” in themselves; they are valuable insofar as they add to the story of knowing Jesus and “the power of his resurrection.”¹² Walt Whitman wrote,

*There was a child went forth every day,
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he
became.*¹³

That’s why we feast our eyes first upon Christ.

The three-tiered wedding cake with white royal icing, yellow marzipan, and Georgian pillars is supposed to be a “traditional wedding cake.” But the “tradition” only became standard in the 1890s. The ceremonial slicing by bride and groom is unknown before the early twentieth century, and doubtless it derives from the fact that to support upper layers the icing must be hard as rock. Cutting it required a saw or brute force, so late-Victorian confectioners created a scene that was later rationalized with ubiquitous photography capturing the first cut, which came to symbolize conjugal collaboration or even virginal union. Notice what comes first: The human imagination creates objects and other “things that matter.”¹⁴ Then comes a metaphorical handle for the object, which puts it to use. What comes next is the story or meaning of that object, as expressed in words and gestures—the last stop on the creativity highway.

Everything material, every “material thing,” has a message. You just need a listening heart or semiotic stethoscope to hear the story. Things are worth keeping around and prizing when they add to the story. If they don’t add to the story, they are hindrances and nothing but “stuff.” Houses filled with “pretty, pointless, expensive things,” as Amy Bloom puts it in her novel *Lucky Us*,¹⁵ breed people who are storyless and soulless and lead pointless lives.

People need to finger relics, leavings, fixtures, fittings. The Amish have a saying that “what you take into your hand you take into your heart.” Sherry Turkle challenges us to “consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. . . . We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with.”¹⁶ Objects are the bridges that connect emotion and reason, the right brain and the left brain. You might even call objects our corpus callosum. Thinking with objects is the epitome of concrete thinking, the opposite of abstract thinking.

As a pianist, I fell in love with the keys. I loved the feel of the ivory and the pedal as much as I loved to think musically and compose, with the black and white keys, new stories of the wideness of God’s mercy and the wonder of God’s world. In the final years of his life, the long-deaf Beethoven based his musical judgments on his piano students’ playing by watching their hands moving on the keys and their feet pumping the pedals. Beethoven connected the sights of fingers and muscles moving on an object to his musical memories of that same object.

Objects matter not just because we see them but often because we don't. The anthropologist Daniel Miller proposes that material objects are, by their very nature, recessive. Things have a way of disappearing into the background, where they provide a stage set for social interactions, silently shaping the terms of human engagement.¹⁷ Scholars are now even talking about "thing theory," as certain objects get invested with meaning beyond their material existence.

There is an old story of a tourist's visit to a famous nineteenth-century preacher in England. When the fan arrived at the preacher's home and asked to see the place where the preacher wrote his masterpieces, he was astounded to discover that the "study" consisted only of one simple room, with no furniture except for a single chair. "But where is your furniture?" the tourist asked.

The preacher replied, "Where is yours?"

"Where is mine?" said the puzzled visitor. "I'm only a visitor here—just passing through."

"So am I," answered the preacher. "So am I."

What's wrong with this story, often called on by preachers, is that it simply isn't true. Jesus is "the Savior of the body."¹⁸ Jesus came to save and heal *all* of us—body, mind, spirit. The Christian mission is not the salvation of souls but the salvation of the world.

"To have the right feelings in our souls," Czech scientist and philosopher Václav Cílek has written, "we need physical contact with objects and places."¹⁹ Claude Levi-Strauss, French anthropologist and architect of structuralism, taught

us in his exploration of “bricolage” that objects are “goods-to-think-with,” which puns in French with “good to think with.”²⁰ Each one of us creates a bricolage of storied objects. Everything you touch, every material thing, is saturated with symbolic meaning and semiotic significance.²¹ The meaning of things is not found in the things themselves, but in the stories of the things.



There can be love at first sight between two people. Sometimes there is love at first sight between a person and a place. *Topophilia* is the name for the ability to experience the emotional charge of a place—an endangered sensation in a franchised world of homogenization. Nonplaces (such as suburbs) are locations stripped of context and excite no emotional attachment.

But sometimes there is love at first sight between a person and an object. The tactile approach to the material transports us in time, traces the remembrances of things touched, and extracts the tracks of memory. The very fact that after 9/11 the bottom fell out of the antiques market even as the craft industry boomed evidences the fact that making things matters; the patience of a practiced craft treats us psychologically, trains us aesthetically, and matures us theologically.

Do we really think that if teens were making things they would be destroying things so easily? Do we really think we can truly capture memory in digital form? Technologies

of memory are being introduced every day that help you embalm the photo of your old baseball glove. But the smell of that old baseball glove triggers memories that photos and digits can't match.

Material for memory should be material in some fashion. The Christian faith is the practice of bricolage. A Christian is a bricoleur, a practitioner of the concrete, a ponderer of the arcane, an artist of artefacts such as a table or tumbler, out of which, in the words of Sylvia Plath, "a certain minor light may still / Leap incandescent."²²

Italian sociologist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who has taught me so much about history but so little about life, claimed we are products of a historical process that has "deposited in [us] an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory."²³ You might call this book you're now holding one attempt at retrieving that inventory, but it's more than that. I did not choose the objects in this inventory because they are relics from my past or talismans for my dreams.²⁴ Rather, this book is an exercise in what the Greeks called *ekphrasis*, which means to "speak out" (as contrasted with *synphrasis*, which means to "speak with"). Medieval writers loved *ekphrasis* and earmarked art, relics, and eucharistic items as worthy of speaking for themselves and speaking into our lives. In *ekphrasis* the focus is less on the object than on the viewer, whose trajectory is changed by contemplation of the object.²⁵

The Amish, and the Shakers before them, taught that whether carving, caning, or canning, human creativity draws

forth the divine and radiates back the Creator's love for us. If things can be transmitters of transcendence, the chapters that follow share twenty-four "things" that have given my life a sustaining narrative and taken hold of my heart. A thing-filled heart is not necessarily a hollow heart if those "things" are storied icons like the ones to which you are about to be introduced.

The life of faith is not one of uninterrupted splendor but of the resplendence of the common, the glory of the ordinary, the marvel of a table hosting people eating, a country road taking in bikers, a field receiving hikers, a seashore impressed by footsteps, a bed engulfing lovers, a ball being tossed successfully by your favorite team, a helping hand extended to another, or a runway to an altar and the Eucharist. This is what is truly called "theology."

The chapters that follow lift out artefacts from my memory box that tell the story of an early woman preacher, a church planter, and a lay theologian: my mother. If you had to tell the story of your life or your family, which items would you pick? I chose a wedding ring, a TV, rocks, leather straps, a Bible, a piano, liniment, braces, soap, a candy bar, a dinner plate, a desk, cheese, a cast-iron stove, shampoo, a nautical door, a chair, an éclair, a washing machine, a matchbox, sawdust, a mattress, and a lamp. These are my stories—my mother's life, handed down to me in heirlooms. Thank you for joining me in opening my memory box.

1

MA'S WEDDING RING, DAD'S HELLEVISION

*O Lord, let me not yearn for power seats or judgment
seats but for the towel of washing feet.*

MABEL BOGGS SWEET

There is an old German proverb:

*Pastor's children and miller's cows
turn out badly, furrow brows.*

I have furrowed many a brow during my career as a preacher's kid.

The preacher in my household was my mother, Mabel Velma Boggs. She was a formidable mother and an ordained minister in the Pilgrim Holiness Church. My brother Phil likes to tell people we grew up on Paris Island, where recruits get basic training in the Marines. The Pilgrim Holiness

Church was the Marine Corps of Methodism. They just wanted a few totally committed people, and our home was one of their boot camps.

Brought up a strict Methodist in the hills of southeastern West Virginia, at age seventeen Mabel Boggs was converted in a parking lot after attending a revival meeting led by a visiting Pilgrim Holiness evangelist. The second-oldest of seven surviving children (five died in childhood), her father (“G. L.”) insisted that she continue her piano playing and her leadership in the Epworth League and attend the Methodist church with the rest of the family. She responded by defying her father, who called her a “killjoy” and a “spoilsport” (among other things). But after a year of Mabel’s stubborn witnessing, the entire Boggs household moved en masse to join a new Pilgrim Holiness church plant in Covington, Virginia, a town right across the state line from the place in West Virginia where the family homestead was located.

As an “eleventh-hour laborer,” Mabel Boggs didn’t bother to graduate from high school before enrolling at God’s Bible School and Missionary Training Home in Cincinnati. The school had been established in 1900 by the founder of the Pilgrim Holiness Church, Martin Wells Knapp (1853–1901), a Methodist minister who was unhappy with Methodism’s increasing “formalism” and decreasing emphasis on what he called “Pentecostal doctrines” like holiness, healing, “special revelation,” and the “gathering together unto Him” of “the Coming of the Lord.”

This is the same school William Seymour attended for a

year. A Roman Catholic from Louisiana, Seymour grew up believing that visions and dreams were forms of divine communication. These “special revelations” inspired Seymour to seek out Knapp’s school, attend his racially and economically inclusive “Revivalist Chapel” in downtown Cincinnati, and take classes for a year at his school before proceeding to San Francisco. There he started the famed Azusa Street Revival that would inaugurate the Third Wave of global Christianity known today as Pentecostalism, which differed from Knapp’s understanding of “Pentecostal” only by the inclusion of tongues.

God’s Bible School taught one thing: the Bible. Its official motto, and the banner over its ads, was “Back to the Bible.” All of its courses revolved around Bible study and how to implement biblical teaching in practical, everyday life. It offered a diploma, not a degree, for those who successfully completed its course of study, and it provided a home base for those preparing to be missionaries. At GBS Mabel Boggs came under the spell of a faculty member who left after a year to teach at another Pilgrim Holiness school. She followed her mentor to Allentown Bible School in Pennsylvania (later called United Wesleyan College) and began theological training in earnest. But the more she studied, the more she doubted her faith and even her salvation. After a two-year dark-night/dry-well spell, she came to a point where, in her words, she had to either “lay it all on the altar” or leave school.

There were four things Mabel confessed to having to “lay down,” with each of them progressively more difficult. First, was she willing to lay down her reputation—her need to be

liked and approved by others? Would she serve, not those who wanted her the most, but those who needed her the most?

Second, was she willing to lay down her marital status? Was she willing to be single, to die an “old maid”?

Third, was she willing to lay down her ambition to be used by God? Was she open to *not* being used by God, but simply to live and die a faithful disciple?

The fourth was the hardest, she later testified: Was she willing to put the church on the altar, to lay down her beloved Pilgrim Holiness church, and simply follow Jesus?

When she said yes to all four, when she “laid it all on the altar,” Mabel Velma Boggs had an experience of entire sanctification and began living the “way of holiness” and full salvation. The very act of laying down everything she held dear gave her the power to pick up a life of doing the very things she had “laid down”: church planting, home mission work, musical evangelism, the dream of foreign missions work, and marriage.

Shortly after graduating from Allentown Bible School, Mabel Boggs started her tent-making ministry. She went to work in the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company, boarding with a family at 225 Chesapeake Avenue while she planted a Pilgrim Holiness (now Wesleyan) church.¹ Her church-planting partner was Walden C. Hall, who today lives in Roanoke, Virginia. He alternated weeks for preaching with Mother, but they sang together in a mixed quartet that toured throughout Virginia and West Virginia. When I finally tracked down Walden in 2014

and heard his reminiscences, one of his first comments was, "I can remember vividly the day and hour I met your mother." Mother was nothing if not memorable.

The high priests tried to hush the resurrection. They tried to hush the disciples: "Speak no further" (Acts 4:17). They took steps to eliminate the disciples as they did Jesus (Acts 5:33).

They lost in Jesus' case. They lost in the disciples' case (Acts 5:39). They lose in our case also.

MABEL BOGGS SWEET

It was in the course of planting this church in Warwick, Virginia, that my mother met my father, Leonard Lucius Sweet. He was a radar operator stationed at Langley Air Force Base in Newport News, Virginia. Both were in their midthirties, my mother two years older than my father. Neither had ever been married.

In 1945 Rev. Boggs was speaking on "Five Words from the Lord" at a revival meeting in Newport News. Her challenge was simple: Why do we reduce faith to a bare minimum rather than expand faith to maximum range and uttermost spirit? That evening the Spirit descended on those assembled in a special way, and a backsliding, moviegoing soldier from upstate New York, who for some reason had gone to the revival that evening, found his heart "strangely warmed"—by both the Spirit and the preacher.

At first my Free Methodist father got nowhere with his overtures for courtship. My Pilgrim Holiness preacher mother from the mountain hollers of West Virginia (where “Yankee” was never just one word) insisted that the Bible clearly said, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.”² For her, my father’s Adirondack Mountain roots were enough “unbelief” to disqualify him from any serious consideration. Second, if she was in the Marines (Pilgrim Holiness), then he was in the Army.

But Leonard Sweet was as persistent as Mabel Boggs was principled. He continued to pursue her as she waited to be “released” from her itinerant ministry by a biblical directive.³ As she told the story, one day she was debating what to do about her gentleman caller, and as she read her Bible according to the “lucky dip” method (what the ancient church called “sortilege”), her finger landed on Deuteronomy 2:3: “You have been traversing these mountains long enough. Turn towards the North” (Mother’s translation, or MT).

Some people have a “life verse.” My brothers and I have a literal life verse. We are alive today because of a verse of Scripture.

In a letter dated 12 October 1945 to “Sargent [*sic*] Leonard L. Sweet”—who was receiving letters at 133 North Arlington Avenue, Gloversville, New York—Mother accepted Dad’s proposal. But not until she had made it clear that this would be a missional marriage; it would “submit” to God first and foremost. It was a relationship in the spirit of William Wilberforce, who had so integrated his faith into

his everyday life that during his honeymoon he took his bride on a tour of Hannah More's Sunday schools.⁴

Despite being "released," Mabel Boggs Sweet never really left the ministry. Even after she was married, she wrote in her journals, "Let your goal be Christ not a husband." She made it clear in her journals that it was never simply that God led her into this marriage with Leonard. It was always "God brought me to Gloversville" or God "brought me to this place." She needed to "find her place" in this new place of mission.



Throughout her life, when people asked Mother, "What are your interests?", she would frequently reply, "The will of God and people are my interests." She kept her ordination and accepted speaking engagements at revivals whenever she could. But her new ministry became the raising of three boys in the "ways of holiness."

For Mother, the family was a domestic church, and she was the pastor. She let us know that as much as she loved "her boys" (as she called us), she had "laid it all on the altar," including us, and put Jesus first. We came second. (Where Dad fit in I could never figure out, but he didn't seem to mind. He'd take whatever of Mother he could get.) When Mother made an evangelistic witness to someone or visited them in their home, she would report back in her journal the results: either "room for Jesus" or "no room for Jesus."

Mother used to tell us that before any of us were born, when she was serving as an evangelist, God "told" her that

she did not have the education to cope with the changes that lay ahead in ministry and the church. But if she would trust God to take her down a different direction—marriage, kids, cleaning, and cooking—God would bless her through her children and use them in ways that she couldn't be used. Mother imbued in her three boys a missionary's sense of destiny, so each of us, as different as we are, all came by a missional mentality naturally.

So Mother's family became her parish, and while she sent us to the public school, she simultaneously homeschooled us in the Christian faith, sending us out the door with these words ringing in our ears: "Children need to be insulated, not isolated." Children should be so prepared and protected by the armor of truth, she believed, that they can actually grow stronger from resisting the enemy.

Coming out of the holiness tradition, sometimes we were called "holy rollers." But Mother taught us to say back to people who mocked us, "I'd rather roll into heaven than dance into hell."

*For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee
to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city.*

ACTS 18:10 (KJV)

the verse Mother said God gave her when the
"good church people" of the Pilgrim Holiness Church
and the Free Methodist Church defrocked her

In the Pilgrim Holiness church, instead of giving a ring to your fiancée, you gave a watch. “She got her watch” was how you referred to an engaged woman. When a girl showed up in church with a watch, everyone started talking. I once pointed out to Mother, “But the watch is more gold and a bigger circle.” Mother smiled as she replied, as if her next words settled everything, “But it’s six inches higher, and not around the finger.”

The problem with the holiness tribe, Mother felt, was that they spent too much time on minor issues like dress and hair and too little time on major issues like Jesus and holiness. She compared them to physicians who spent all their time diagnosing patients and none of their time on prescribing medicine for the cure. Or as she put it pointedly, “There is more concern about the dress of the bride than the cry of the Bridegroom.”⁵

When Mother accepted a ring at her wedding to a “liberal” Free Methodist, and when she bobbed her hair for the ceremony, it was too much for the denominational establishment. Word of what happened reached headquarters, and Mabel Boggs Sweet was brought up by her peers on three charges of worldliness: She had accepted a wedding ring, she had cut and curled her hair, and she had worn lipstick and rouge.⁶

Mother pleaded guilty to the first two offenses but not guilty to the third. The wedding pictures were claimed as “proof positive” that all three charges were true. But Mother pointed out that photographers of the day routinely colored

pictures to accent certain features, such as cheeks and lips. In fact, other wedding pictures showed no evidence of cosmetics on her face. The prosecution argued that no photographer would have highlighted those features if they hadn't been highlighted in the first place.

When I heard this story over and over again growing up, I formulated one of the basic facts of life: You can't fix stupid. The just-plain-ignorant will hear "Marvel not" in John's Gospel as "Marble not," and before you know it, it's a sin to play a game of marbles. And no amount of reasoning will change minds.

In spite of a spirited defense by Mother's local church pastor (who later became the head of the denomination), she was found guilty of all charges, defrocked, and subjected to a form of shunning.

My father, who never trusted "those PH people," was not unhappy that we would now migrate over to where his family worshiped: the Free Methodist Church. But my mother thought the Free Methodist weak at the knees, as opposed to the powerful praying of the Pilgrim Holiness people. So even after she had her orders recalled and we were kicked out of the church, she still dragged us to the Pilgrim Holiness prayer meeting on Wednesday nights.

My father refused to go. So it was on Mother to sneak us into the church. We would sit in the last row. Not only did no one speak to us, but one time the ushers were so mad that the Sweet family was still coming to church that they took Mother by the elbow and dragged her out of the

church. They picked us boys up, carted us out, and dumped us on the sidewalk with a stern warning to never return. The next Wednesday night, the Sweet family showed up again, but the pastor was present this time, and no usher laid a hand on us.

My impression of ushers growing up in church: a group of men who always and everywhere wore dark suits, black shoes, and serious faces as they passed the plates and grabbed them authoritatively when they reached the end of the aisles. Surely these men, I thought, owned the church.

We kept up this pattern of being a part of two churches: the Free Methodist one, where we attended church on Sunday morning and Sunday evening, youth group and “sword drills” during the week, and Pine Grove Camp meeting every summer; and the Pilgrim Holiness one, where we went to Wednesday-night prayer meetings and Victory Grove Camp meeting every summer, as well as some other holiness camp meetings during the summer, when my father’s vacation could accommodate them. Mabel Boggs Sweet received preaching credentials in the Free Methodist Church and spent whatever time she could conducting evangelistic meetings and revivals in the mountains of North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia.

This lasted until I was age nine, when Dad succumbed to the blandishments of the devil’s blinking box. Up until then we grew up watching the radio. But my father wanted to watch a TV show called *Bonanza*, and my brothers and I wanted to watch a show that aired just before it called

The Wonderful World of Disney. It was these two shows that killed Sunday-night worship. All the church had to do was reschedule its Sunday-night services for an hour earlier, but it believed that it could take on pop culture and win. It is a lesson the church is still learning the hard way.

I will never forget the Friday night when Rev. Rudd came calling to see if it was true about the Sweet home invasion by “hellelevision.” As soon as he crossed the threshold, our pastor dispatched my brothers and me upstairs and told us not to come down until we were instructed otherwise. Being of a recalcitrant nature, I snuck down to the first landing in the staircase and heard everything. With the devil staring him in the face, Rev. Rudd gave my parents an ultimatum: the church or the TV. He would give them until Sunday to decide, if they couldn’t decide at that moment. But there was no other alternative in choosing whom we would serve: God or the devil.

I couldn’t understand why our pastor was so upset. We only got to watch three hours a week of our own shows, and two of those hours were reserved for *The Howdy Doody Show* by my two brothers. Sometimes mother would put on *Queen for a Day* when she was doing something else, but that was basically it. How could these shows cause such a fuss? (I suspected the *Queen* shows as the culprit, since mother seemed to pretend she wasn’t really watching it.)

That Sunday morning, during the announcements, Rev. Rudd asked for a decision from the Sweet family. The church got quiet, and Dad hung his head, refusing

to speak. Never one to pass up an opportunity to deliver a sermon, Mother stood up and launched into some of the best preaching of her life. She explained *adiaphora* (“things indifferent”) without using the word and made a case for matter as not being evil in itself (only in what we do with it) without ever using the word *Manichaeism*. She then used the example of the pews we were sitting in: They were heavy and wooden but not evil unless a strong man picked one up and threw it at people. I thought she was getting a little too into this illustration, so I was glad when she sat down.

A short meeting of those ushers followed after church, while we waited outside. The ruling came down: We had been removed from the membership rolls of the Free Methodist Church. That meant Mother’s preaching credentials would be declared null and void as well. If I heard “you can’t fix stupid” from the Pilgrims, I heard from the Frees that “there is always someone who hears truth as treason.”

This is how I became a United Methodist. They’ll take anyone. And they warmly took the Sweet family. After getting kicked out of “the best churches in town,” I grew to appreciate the graciousness and spaciousness of the United Methodist church. To quote the psalmist, “O Lord, thou has set my foot in a spacious room.”⁷

The shunning that took place after we were kicked out of the Free Methodist Church was in some ways harsher than the shunning by the Pilgrim Holiness people. Some of my father’s relatives (including his sister and stepmother) were in this church, and for many years we could not enter

my aunt's house or play with my cousins. We exchanged presents on the front porch of the house where my Gramma May and Aunt Charlotte lived.

The emotional civil war of always feeling like an alien took its toll on Mother. The first verse God gave her when she was banned and shunned by the Free Methodists was Luke 9:34: "While he was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud."

No matter how great the fear, the cloud was needed for growth. The cloud was needed to face oneself. The cloud was needed to give voice and place to Jesus. The cloud was needed to prepare for the needy in the valley. The cloud was needed to make truth clear and uncontaminated by our own opinions. The cloud was needed to save us from bitterness. In Mother's words, "It's what you learn in the cloud that will bless in the valley."

When the loneliness and depression became almost unbearable, when the church in Gloversville was so against her, God gave Mother a second verse, a verse so tender to her she could hardly talk about it or recite it: "For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."⁸ It would not be those in the church who would save her. It would be those in the city, in the world, whom God would use to protect and preserve her.

Sometimes God is more active in the world than in the church. A powerful expression of this is Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. If you look at the sky in that painting, you can

tell these are turbulent times. In the midst of all the confusion and fear, the houses in the painting are “lit up.” But the lights in the church are out.

To this day, I fail miserably at living up to ideological blueprints, political correctitudes, or theological cutouts for a reason.

Because the Methodist church had no Sunday-night service or Wednesday-night prayer meeting, Mother insisted that we still go to Sunday-night service at the Free Methodist Church. Once again, no one—except kids our age who didn't know better—would speak to us. So, by the time I had reached nine years of age, we went to the Methodist Church on Sunday morning, the Free Methodist church on Sunday nights, and the Pilgrim Holiness church on Wednesday nights for prayer meeting. To a kid it didn't seem that we were getting kicked out of churches so much as we were picking up churches.

The best thing for my brothers and me was that now we had three summer camps to attend: Skye Farm Methodist Camp in Warrensburg, New York; Pine Grove Free Methodist Camp in Saratoga Springs, New York; and Victory Grove Camp outside of Albany, New York.



In 2015, both the Free Methodists and the Pilgrim Holiness churches (now Wesleyan Church) celebrated Mother, formally apologizing for their treatment of her and, in the case of the Free Methodists, restoring her ministerial credentials.

Even though her restoration came twenty-plus years after her death, it was a proud moment for me as her son to receive the church's *nostra culpa* on her behalf. I wish it had been more like the vindication of Mary Mackillop (1842–1909), also known as St. Mary of the Cross, Australia's singular canonized saint. She is the only person in the history of Christianity who has gone from excommunication to canonization in her lifetime. She was excommunicated partly because she was not acting as the Roman Catholic Church thought a woman should act. Mother never did either.

In 2004 I was asked to address the General Conference of the Wesleyan Church in Indianapolis. I would have moved heaven and earth to accept this invitation (and I did), because at the time I saw it as the ultimate vindication of Mother. But just before I went to the assembly hall to deliver my keynote address, I stopped by the bookstore, which featured a new volume directly from the Wesleyan Publishing House: *Celebrate Our Daughters: 150 Years of Women in Wesleyan Ministry*.⁹ I bought it in a hurry, and on my way to the stage, I checked to see whether there was an entry for Mabel Boggs Sweet. There was none by that name, but under “Mabel Boggs” there was, featuring dates, places of ministry, and an invitation: “If you know anything more about this woman preacher, please be in touch with us.”

When I stood up to preach that evening, I had my Bible in one hand and that book in the other. Guess which one I read from first?