

Keep Singing

The Rev. Dr. Seth Weeldreyer, First Presbyterian Church of Kalamazoo

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John 15:9-17; Acts 10:34-43

I need your help. Can we remember or imagine a song forbidden sung with hope and determination. Maybe a time when people were singing and forcibly stopped, or kept going despite, defiant, in the face threat? Maybe it's something Baron von Trapp in the *Sound of Music* full of love for family and country on stage singing *Edelweiss* with Nazis watching and waiting for him in the front row. Maybe like Katniss Everdeen singing a childhood lullaby distinctive to her region full of love poured into her.

Deep in the meadow, under a willow

A bed of grass, a soft green pillow

Lay down your head and close your eyes

And when they open, the sun will rise.ⁱ

Now she sings with deep humanizing care and a kind of holy defiance against President Snow and Capitol oppressors after a child so young and innocent gets slain in the Hunger Games. She sings. She rises. And that's when others join the song. I wonder if we can remember or imagine a melody of love sung with hope, determination, in defiance of threat. I'd like to hear yours.

Jesus wanted his closest friends to remember the melody he'd taught them. A love song in how he lived. Caring for the most vulnerable. Even defying religious rules and cultural norms that didn't help people flourish fully. So centered in Divine Peace himself, it radiated to others—individuals blind or lame, deemed enemy or outcast, crowds who followed to hear him preach and teach. So they'd catch the tune, have it stick in their minds and hearts, on endless repeat. As Angela picked up where we left off last week—reading about being the vine and branches—it's the night before Jesus dies. Now he moves from poetic to personal appeal. No longer servants, you are my friends. The very word “friends” is a variation of “love.” Bonds of friendship we share get defined and embodied ultimately by *philia*. Beyond fair-weather fun (though that's good to share), it's hanging together in tough times, seeking truth in love though hard to hear, forgiveness when there's hurt. And in ancient Roman Palestine, it's what lords or people in power positions would call their closest counselors who really do their work. Friends. In this Easter season when we celebrate and trust in resurrection, we hear Jesus promise: you'll know me alive with you whenever you pour yourselves out in love. He calls them (and us) to move from being backup vocals for his solo, to carrying the tune, harmonizing it in our own ways, arranging different variations, different instrumentation or syncopation as expresses the needs and realities of our time and place.

But then, we know, friends, it's not always grammy nominated when people start singing a new song as Psalm 98 urges beyond norms accepted. Beethoven's Fifth Symphony “duh, duh, duh,

duhhhh”. Jazz, Chubby Checker (someone said), hip hop ... each of which people with power demeaned and tried to suppress, before becoming beloved expressions of vital life. Even the Star-Spangled Banner, Autumn noted was originally a raunchy bar tune. Maybe like growing beyond medieval chant and “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” to “Here I Am, Lord” and “Christ, Be Our Light.” That’s the tension Peter felt and the intense question if not condemnation from peers he faces. On the surface, Cornelius embodies all that established Jewish practice of the time repels—doesn’t follow the Law, a foreigner, and worst of all a leader of the deadly oppressing Roman army. “Really, God?” Peter says. “You want me to go sing for Cornelius and teach him Jesus’ song?” Yet, living faith, Peter trusts beyond accepted limits and familiar comforts. You see, this conversion story is as much about him and the whole direction of the earliest Christian church, as it is about Cornelius. Ordinary people like us debated and came to accept: I truly understand that Divine Grace knows no bounds. Holy Love breaches all barriers. No hindrances to whom we should try to help. No restrictions on who shares this table. No limits on what’s possible when Christ’s love fills and flows through us.

Peter comes preaching peace by Jesus Christ, he is Lord of All. Maybe it seems a familiar refrain, a normalized, innocuous claim for us now. Peter’s declaration is the first time anyone says it. For them this affirmation of faith is a bold, dangerous, possibly deadly proclamation of dissent. You see, that’s exactly what people said of Caesar, proclaiming peace in the name of his Lordship. As people like Cornelius and our ancient ancestors learned Jesus’ love song, they got he’s no despot like Casar wielding the power of fear, oppressing, cancelling, silencing so he remains the loudest solo voice. No, Jesus is all about empowering freedom, helping others carry the melody and harmonize in their own voice, building up the grandest chorus imaginable, including everyone who wants to join. Whether we’ve been professionally trained for years or shushed along the way, told we couldn’t carry a tune in a paper bag.

“We are all witnesses!” Peter urges. Jesus calls us in here to find our voice. Then he sends us out to join the song! Let us all our tongues and talents employ, serving with shouts of joy, loving with all our words and deeds. As these two texts replayed in my mind and heart this week, friends—Jesus’ command to love and Peter’s proclamation of Christ as Lord of all—the tune that got stuck in me was “How Can I Keep from Singing?” We sing the original version: “Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?” What comfort and inspiration as we try to carry the tune amid all the threats we know. Health concerns and setbacks. Hurting or broken relationships. Bias in society. Violence on our streets. Yeah, I yearn to keep hearing the song of Christ’s love as Lord of all.

As Enya and others sing beautiful versions, it’s changed to: “Since Love is Lord ...” Actually, I don’t mind. And I don’t think Jesus would either. After all and in all things, God’s power / Jesus’ Lordship in this world centers in love. So, if people sing that tune, I think he’d say: Amen! And inasmuch as *we* know the tune, I believe he’d want us to make up new words, riff a bit with

grace notes and chords—whatever expresses our hearts, connects with others. As we all keep singing amidst troubles of our time.

Keep singing, friends, with the privilege of being Jesus' holy counselors, his hands and feet, the body of the risen Christ in our world. Keep singing, friends, through cards and phone calls and visits and meals. Keep singing, friends, in protests others may hear and choices no one ever knows, ever trying to order our world with love to bring life God desires. Keep singing in defiance of tyrants even when they're in the front row. Keep singing for the most vulnerable children and adults losing life every day. Keep singing until all people are free—honored as they are, engaged with meaningful work, bearing musical fruit that others savor.

I need your help. Really, Jesus needs our help. I wonder if we can remember or imagine a melody of Holy Love sung with hope, determination, in defiance of threat. I'd like to hear yours. Something about grace and peace that brings new life, makes it flourish for all people and creation. My heart was listening for echoes of songs forbidden that people just kept singing. Ahhh! That was music in the Civil Rights Movement. Bernice Johnson Reagon was part of the Freedom Singers, before *Sweet Honey in the Rock*. They'd sing spirituals rooted in Southern congregational style—riffed with slides and calls distinctive to their region. They'd go around in a station wagon and sing and educate, protesting segregation. And they'd get arrested, thrown in jail many times. And they'd keep singing. Reagon remembers the time they were singing “Over my head, I see trouble in the air ...” and she changed the line to “... I see FREEDOM in the air ...” And whatever the words, she said, people began to realize these were their songs, too. They could sing the tune and claim their own voice to express what they feel of hurt and hope.ⁱⁱ Do we feel it, dear friends in Christ? Are we warming up our hearts and vocal chords?

Over my head, I see trouble in the air.
Over my head, I see trouble in the air.
Over my head, I see FREEDOM in the air.
There must be a God somewhere.

Over my head, I hear music in the air.
Ina my soul, I feel music in the air.
Outa my heart, I'll sing music in the air.
There must be a God somewhere.
God must be with me ... God must be with you ... God must be with us right here.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008).

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Freedom_Singers