

## Finally Comes the Poet

### Ephesians 3:14-21

Is there a difference between worship and the part of our Sunday morning gathering we call the teaching or preaching? Many churches, sometimes including this one, differentiate in our gathering the times of singing, prayer, etc. and call that worship, to distinguish it from the time of teaching – the sermon. While this can be a convenient distinction, it is not an accurate one. Sermons are worship, a vital aspect of the worship of the community. Readings, prayers, the Offering, announcements, and singing are teaching opportunities.

In this case, it will be helpful to define *teaching* more clearly. What is teaching when it comes to the gathering of a community of faith? Teaching is what calls us to that new life in us and through us by the power of the gospel message. It is the word that challenges us to recognize how we might have been living a somewhat reduced faith through the week, settling for less than the best we could be. It is the affirmation that nothing less than God's presence animates our lives.

Here is the *Ask Jack* question on which this sermon is based:

Some of the worship songs we sing at Crossroads are dear to me and the music really feeds me, but sometimes the lyrics just stop me in my tracks – words like sin, salvation, and unworthiness. Can I learn to be creative enough to find new words? What can I do? What can the church do?

I am very grateful for this question. It provides an opportunity to talk about some important issues right out loud, right here in church and not in the parking lot! It gives us an opportunity to practice being community in a setting filled with both uncertainty and possibility by talking about things that matter a great deal. We can touch a depth of meaning to which our worship points us and risk sharing ourselves at a level that is deeper than we might otherwise. And we have the chance to grow in the Spirit and affirm the indescribable gift of being church together in God's Spirit. And you thought all we were going to do was talk about lyrics!

One of the drawbacks of reading a sermon text rather than being present in its living presentation is that you miss the interaction of the congregation. At this point, members of the congregation shared notes they had made about particular lyrics in the songs they had sung that morning – especially lyrics that just “stopped them in their tracks.” You may be able to hear some of that sharing and my responses on the voice file of this sermon. In that conversation, we were also reminded of the other side of this question. There are some songs we no longer do because of the lyrics. Many of these are songs people really miss singing and for which there are feelings of loss and some grief.

On the other hand, the following section of material was not part of the live presentation of this sermon because the congregational dialogue did not permit time. Besides, a lot of the material was included in the dialogue.

So what can we do in response to the reality that the lyrics of worship songs do not always flow in perfect sync with the articulation of theology from the pulpit? One thing is to remind each person that individuals are always free to make any changes they want, to get very creative

with the lyrics they sing. They might even want to sing “la-la.” People can exercise this creativity on the spot or work out some changes in advance. Check out the private web site or contact the church office to get a copy of the lyrics of the songs for the coming Sunday. But it may still be challenging to be that creative.

As congregation, what can we do in terms of worship songs to act responsibly in the face of what we hear and feel? How can we affirm the importance of lyrics and their meaning for our ability to worship? How can we also affirm the importance of traditional songs and recognize how disruptive changing or dropping those songs can be? What are our options?

When it comes to options, we could just pretend that the words don’t really matter. We could just discard all songs that are *not correct* or that have some problematic passages, though we would lose many beloved songs -- perhaps most of our beloved songs. We could stop using just those songs that have particularly difficult or inflammatory lyrics. In fact, our congregation has already dropped several of these from regular usage.

Options include making *light changes* when possible, trying to be creative enough to rework, with a light touch, some lyrics that seem to be problematic. Often when you make such changes and put them on the overhead, most people are not even aware that changes have been made. There are problems with this approach. It is something of an infringement of copyright law by changing the artistic work of a lyricist. Also, there will almost always be some people who notice the change and for whom it is disruptive.

It can often be helpful to provide an interpretive context to problematic texts, such as the scripture reference represented or other ways the words can be understood. Often time and space are needed to understand the poetry more deeply, though time and space reflection and contemplation are not usually so available during the flow of a worship service. Of course, writing new songs is always the best response for the Church. New sacred poetry can reflect the new ways we have for interpreting our faith.

If we consider making light changes, there are some possibilities. In the song “Rejoice, Rejoice, Christ Is In You,” the words “like a mighty army” could become “like a mighty people.” A shifting from third person to second person can help in dealing with what some consider a problematic text. In the song “I Believe in Jesus,” the lyricist already offers such a shift in the last stanza to, “I believe in you, Lord.” A good example of offering alternative text options is in the song *Abba Father*. An alternative is to sing *Imma Mother*.

A great deal of Christian music uses male language for God and for people. It is not always a simple matter of substituting “God” for “Him” or “people” for “mankind.” Gender inclusive language can feel very disruptive for many people, but the preponderance of masculine imagery within Christianity has clearly been burdensome to many. And God is not a male any more than a female. The whole idea of male and female reflects the totality of who God is and especially who God has created us to be as persons. In this day and age, we are increasingly aware of the continuum of gender identity and that we are not all neatly divided between male and female.

Creative changes can be disruptive when songs are familiar and especially when they are beloved. We can only imagine the outcry when the lyrics of the beloved old hymn *Alas and Did my Savior Bleed* were change to “would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I?” from the more strident “for such a worm as I?” An option may be, at least sometimes, just to leave the text as it was originally and recognize that poetry from different cultures and time periods expressed faith in different ways and with differing sensibilities. The beloved hymn *Amazing Grace*, with its line “saved a wretch like me,” expressed John Newton’s personal shame and guilt at having been captain of a slave ship for so many years.

There are many songs containing scripture references that can seem obscure without background or context. The song *Let Us Give Thanks* contains a reference to Isaiah 49 encouraging us to “give thanks that our names are written in the book of life [and] inscribed upon his palms.” This is not a reference to Jesus’ crucifixion, but Yahweh speaking to Israel in the midst of her exile: “<sup>15</sup>Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. <sup>16</sup>See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.”

There is the reference in *Blessed Be the Name* to Job 1:21: “you give and take away.” This can seem a capricious act by an unreliable God. In truth, after the loss of his family, wealth, and health, Job expressed deep faith in the reliability of God who is God. <sup>21</sup>“Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” (NRSV) This passage sets the stage for a valuable conversation and critique of ancient wisdom in the book of Job.

One of the most challenging and potentially divisive theological issues for Christians today is the cluster of beliefs around Jesus’ divinity, Christian exclusivity, and punitive salvation. Songs about the blood of Jesus and our gaining salvation through his death, etc. speak to the doctrine of atonement – the bringing together of divinity and humanity through Jesus. That process involves more than just the death of Jesus – also his life and his words – and his death was more than substitution for our punishment from God. Salvation is far more than a ticket to heaven after we die and it is not the exclusive property of the Christian Church any more than it was the exclusive property of the Jewish Temple in Jesus’ time.

Lyrics concerning these issues are sometimes problematic because of the simplistic, manipulative, and punitive ways they have been used in the past, and sometimes in the present. One song that combines these issues, and that my congregation loves to sing, is *Amazing Love*. “How can it be that you my God would die for me?” In a positive way, what is most important is God’s “amazing love.” These lyrics recognize God’s presence was focused in and made clear through Jesus of Nazareth. This presence was so clear in Jesus that believers came to understand his life as identical to God’s life. The cost of reconciliation in love is often terrible for God and for us. Jesus’ life and death were not an accidental tragedy, but the offering of a life. The cross is a sign of the full extent of God’s love shown us in Jesus – the amount of commitment love requires to transform the world.

It is said that poetry is art that speaks first to the mind and then to the heart, and that music is art that speaks first to the heart and then to the mind. Is it any wonder that song -- blending music

and poetry – is the vehicle that expresses worship so powerfully? Is it any wonder that worship music means so much to us? And is it any wonder the words we sing contain some of our most powerful feelings about God, faith, and church? These feelings are strong negative and also strongly positive.

Today's question touches a much deeper issue for us than lyrics alone. Our response to these lyrics invites us to move deeper into our own faith journey. And it stirs other questions:

- Can we really be community together if we believe and feel so differently about important issues?
- Does God really know me and accept me “just as I am?”
- Do I even believe in God, in Jesus, or in the Spirit?
- How specific can we be about belief without alienating each other?
- Can I be on a faith journey even if I'm not sure what I believe?
- Can I trust this congregation with my heart, my grief, and my alienation?
- Can I trust you to accept me once you know what I'm really thinking and feeling?

Isn't the fact that we're having such a conversation out loud, in the sanctuary and in the worship service instead of in the parking lot, telling us that the answer at least just might be yes? We are accepted. We are loved not despite, but because of our differences?

The truth of God is a poet's truth. I borrowed the title of this sermon from Walter Brueggemann's book *Finally Comes the Poet*. Such poetry is not necessarily rhyme, but language that is symbolic and subversive. Faith can only be expressed in symbolic language, in images that point beyond themselves. We need space and time for reflection, for symbolic interpretation, and for interaction with our own life journeys. We don't often take time to reflect about the lyrics of worship songs. There just is not much time or opportunity in the flow of worship! That reality can lead us to react out of our own experience, fear, and history.

The promise of Biblical Christianity is that new life is not just a new life for you or me. It is the promise of reality itself changing. It is the promise of that new creation the Bible proclaims at it's end (Revelation 21: 1): “a new heaven and a new earth.” It doesn't seem to make much sense at a merely rational or literal level, but this new life becomes available to us through the death of Jesus and through our own willingness to die to self in the hope of resurrection here and now, in this life!

The message of Jesus is dynamic, challenging, unsettling, sometimes uncomfortable, and often irritating. It is not a message for 2000 years ago, but of and for today. Jesus irritated the powers that were and the powers that still are. He invites us today to be a similarly prophetic voice and irritating presence in our society – to go the extra mile in making reconciliation happen, to make reparations above and beyond what is owed for past wrongs, and to give more than we have ever taken. The call and challenge of faith is to speak a non-reduced prophetic, poetic word to church and society so that true justice and true peace can begin to flow like rushing water around us.

We are free to envision and create, and with the right and responsibility to claim the possibilities that are within us as a free people of faith. We are free to create a world of justice, peace, and inclusive love -- free to sing a new song and to make the *new* together. When people of faith

share these blessings with the world, then we will bless them, bless ourselves, and bless God.. Ultimately, the answer is always a new song. Our lives are a new song. Last fall, I was thinking about issues like these discussed today. I wrote these lyrics, then later the music. This poem is an attempt to capture some sense of who we are as church and the nature of our life together. It is a song about worship, community, and the journey.

**The Gathering by Jack Price ©2009**

1. We gather in a holy place where God already lives.  
We gather to find Jesus' face, the strength his presence gives.  
We gather in the Spirit's life. We hope to see her face.  
Our presence is an offering, a gift of holy grace.

**Chorus** We worship in community, each one a vital part.  
Our songs and prayers and laughter in unity of heart.  
We live along a journey of mystery and pain.  
Immersed in Spirit passion, we're called to life again.

2. But prayers are never finished till justice comes on earth  
In us the life of Jesus is finally given birth,  
Until we seek maturity along a faithful way,  
The culminating worship of living love each day. (repeat chorus)
3. We gather now and worship at the crossroads of our way.  
Opportunity and challenge confront us every day.  
The call of Jesus meets us with the Holy Spirit's power.  
Th'eternal God invites us to partnership this hour . (repeat chorus)