

***ALL THAT JAZZ***  
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine  
University Congregational Church  
June 13, 2010

**Reading: Exodus 15: 19-21 (NRSV)**

**When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and chariot drivers went into the sea, the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.**

**Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:**

**“Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
Horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”**

There was a queue of souls waiting outside the Pearly Gates where St. Peter was busy explaining the new procedure for admission to Heaven.

“Times change and even Heaven must change with them,” explained St. Peter.

“Before entering, new arrivals are now required to answer a questionnaire for the administrative records of our celestial computer bank.”

He turned to the first new arrival.

“Madam, what was your annual income on earth?”

“350,000 dollars a year,” came the reply.

“Which profession were you in?”

“I was a bank manager.”

“Thank you,” said St. Peter, “you may enter.”

The next soul approached.

“What was your annual income?”

“100,000 dollars a year.”

“And your profession?”

“I was a doctor.”

“Thank you,” said St. Peter, “you may enter.”

A third soul approached the pearly gates.

“What was your annual income on earth?” enquired St. Peter.

“6,000 dollars a year.”

“Oh,” said St. Peter, “which band did you play in?”

Or did you hear about the time St. Peter is in Heaven checking ID's? He asks a man, "What did you do on Earth?"

The man says, "I was a doctor."

St. Peter says, "An honorable profession sir, go right up the red carpet and through those pearly gates. Next! What did you do on Earth?"

The woman answered, "I was a school teacher."

"Indeed," said St. Peter, “a noble profession. Go right up the red carpet and through those pearly gates. Next! And what did you do on Earth?"

"I was a musician."

"Oh," said Peter, “go around to the side door, up the freight elevator, and through the kitchen.”<sup>1</sup>

If Rodney Dangerfield were here this morning he might say, “I’m telling you Angie, these musicians can’t get no respect.”

When I knew that Angela Parrish and her jazz combo was going to play this morning I got to thinking about her and her talent as a jazz musician. I wondered

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter Guidi, “Jazz Jokes,” [www.members.chello.nl/guidiflute/jokes.html](http://www.members.chello.nl/guidiflute/jokes.html).  
Downloaded 6/10/10.

about the relationship between jazz and faith and I thought about music in the Bible and the musicians of the Bible, especially women. That reminded me of Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses. In the passage that I read from the book of Exodus I am sure you recognize that the Hebrews had successfully crossed the Red Sea in their escape from slavery in Egypt. Miriam took up the tambourine and along with the other women sang and danced a song of freedom.

What I did not read to you are verses 1 – 18, which is the freedom song of Moses. Moses' song was undoubtedly set in a predetermined rhythm with defined movements. It basically played the same theme of the death of Pharaoh's charioteers and the triumph of the Lord over the Egyptians. We only have two verses of Miriam's song. But I would like to propose to you this morning that Miriam's song is a riff on the song of Moses featuring her unique voice and instrument, the tambourine. Her music was the kind of music that made people want to groove and dance. Like any good jazz musician Miriam picked up the main melody and gave the song her own interpretation. Miriam gave the music her own swing, tapping out a unique rhythm on her timbrel. She offered an improvisation that invited others to interact with her music.

I would like to propose to you that the faith of a Congregational Christian is something like a jazz musician. We all begin with the base line of melody, chords and notes. From the basic melody we experiment with time and rhythm; we give the music of faith our own interpretation; we invite others to bring their voices or instruments and innovate; and then we return to the fundamental structures of the music. I also think that a good jazz group will later go back to the original melody and

offer up yet another innovation that will not sound exactly like the first performance. For example, I have never heard a live performance of Dave Brubeck's "Take Five" played the same. I doubt if you recorded Dave Brubeck's band every time it played "Take Five" that you would find it exactly the same either. Perhaps different instrumentalists would be featured. Instrumentalists might take the melody in a different direction or change up the rhythm from the last time they played it. And I think the Christian faith is a lot like that. We have a basic melody line and we spend the rest of our faith interpreting, translating, and innovating with that base line.

The Christian faith has a basic melody that proclaims that God is love. God's love expresses itself in God's grace, compassion, forgiveness, and justice. We turn to the life and teachings of Jesus as the model of God's love. In the covenant of University Congregational Church we declare, "In the love of truth and in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, this Church exists to serve those who believe that the Christian faith affords our clearest insight into the nature of God's will." That is our melody. That is our base line. That is our faith line. We trust that song.

Our faith does not presume that there are no other paths to God. We respect the faith songs of Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and all of the others. But these are not the songs of faith that we sing. We might draw from their music but primarily for the purpose of enhancing our own. Buddhism has done much to complement and supplement my Christian faith. But I do not sing the Buddhist song because it is not my own. Buddhism often gives me wisdom and insight, and it often serves to critique my Christian tradition. I do not sing the Buddhist song because its melody is different

from my own. That is not said in judgment of Buddhism but in recognition of and an honoring of our distinctive music.

My calling as preacher and teacher of the Christian faith is to tell the story – or sing the song, if you will – of God’s love and justice. Like every other man or woman I need to be reminded of the basic melody of my faith. I have to be reminded of it weekly, daily, hourly. How is it that Jesus is the model of God’s value of and purpose for human beings? How do I live with 1st century peasant wisdom in a 21<sup>st</sup> century driven by technology and information? How does that song go about “God loves us we love each other?” How do you whistle, “the first shall be last and the last shall be first?” How do you even hum the tune, “take up your cross and follow me?” Remind me of that melody of hope!

My faith is a living faith and I do not just play the written melody over and over again. As I grow older and mature I play the music differently. The rhythm may change, perhaps due to new exigencies of research or national crises or the gentle influences of newfound wisdom. I may venture into an interpretation that reflects a larger awareness of the movement of God’s spirit in my life. I may slow down the tempo for no other reason than the fact that some things bear repeating.

This points to one of the great gifts of Congregationalism. We do not claim or require any of our members to embrace creed or doctrine. We have the melody of God’s love but we do not require a prescribed way of singing it. Congregationalism stipulates the freedom of human conscience. We understand that human beings have different minds and unique souls. Life experience shapes our perception of truth. Congregationalism do not expect us to agree with one another in order to walk with

one another. Every person who sits in the pew is a human being with a mind that is free to search responsibly for truth. One of the functions of the church is to protect the freedom of religious inquiry within the congregation as well as in the community at large.

We call this the “free pew.” Sitting in a pew at University Congregational Church means that you are sitting in the pew of freedom. There is no expectation of agreement amongst us save that of the free conscience within the larger context of God’s grace. You will find within the ranks of our members and friends progressive Christians, conservative Christians, agnostics who do not know if they are Christian, and even atheists who do not believe in the metaphysics of Christianity but nonetheless respect the moral perspective of the Christian tradition.

The freedom of the pew has the expectation that you will take up the base line and give it thought and attention. Consider its rhythm by the light of your own conscience. Let reason play a riff on a major theme – or – pick up a minor note and explore its expression. What you cannot do in the free pew is nothing. Your conscience is only free if you put it to work, exercise it, and coax a note from it.

At a minimum, the same expectations can be made of the Congregational minister. You have the freedom of the pew. I have the freedom of the pulpit. I should think that any Congregational church would expect a minister to think, study, read, and wrestle with the meaning of the Christian faith. Such a minister is also a man or woman of conscience who must be afforded the same freedom of conscience as we tender our members. I certainly do not expect the members of my congregation

to agree with me. I do expect the members of the congregation to think for themselves and protect the freedom of the pulpit.

I understand that I am very often wrong. I very often change my mind. I very often contradict myself, just like everyone else in this room. But the vitality of the Christian church is a free pulpit where Sunday after Sunday women and men struggle with the gospel of Jesus Christ in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other. Faith is strengthened not by right answers or correct doctrine. Faith is vital when we are challenged to deeper understanding. Faith is robbed of its verve when preachers are afraid to preach the truth with love for fear that someone will walk out of the Sunday service and withhold their financial support.

I have listened to a lot of sermons in my life. I estimate that I have delivered over 1,600 sermons myself. I still listen to student sermons from time to time as well as other preachers across the nation. I do not expect preachers to get it right every time. I do want to see in their preaching something of their soul that has taken the meaning of human existence seriously. I want to hear their souls reaching up out of their minds and grasping at the heels of eternal hope. I need to hear their struggle for what it means to be a man or woman of integrity in a world of easy sleazy moral turpitude. I want to hear the words of one who has fallen down and risen up, fallen down and risen up, and fallen down and risen up with their eyes ever on the prize of grace. The nation is desperate for a word of truth in the midst of propaganda about the economy, war, immigration, health care, and a degraded environment. I hope that the preachers will deliver a word from God on the issues that impact our very lives.

Let us all, lay and clergy alike take up the melody of faith. Let's sing it straight through as it is written. And then, let us innovate with the rhythm, emphasize an instrument or singer and then another. Take off on a line of music and see where it takes you. We'll come back and we will reaffirm those basic chords and notes. Bring in some new players and listen to what they do with our song, how they will interpret it, and groove with it. It will make our faith vibrant, relevant, and a whole lot of fun. Let me close with this example.

A minister decided to do something a little different one Sunday morning. He said to his congregation, "Today, in church, I am going to say a single word and you are going to help me preach. Whatever single word I say, I want you to sing whatever hymn comes to your mind."

The pastor shouted out "CROSS!" Immediately the congregation started singing "THE OLD RUGGED CROSS."

He hollered out "GRACE." The congregation began to sing "AMAZING GRACE."

The preacher said, "POWER!" The congregation sang "THERE IS POWER IN THE BLOOD".

The minister said with great feeling, "SEX." The congregation fell into total silence. Everyone was in shock. They all nervously began to look around at each other, afraid to say anything.

Then all of a sudden, from way in the back of the church, a little old



87-year-old grandmother stood up and began to sing with all the passion she could muster, "PRECIOUS MEMORIES."<sup>2</sup>

Hit it, Angie.

*Finis*

---

<sup>2</sup> "Good Jazz Jokes," author unknown, at <http://forum.allaboutjazz.com/showthread.php?t=1804>. Downloaded 6/11/10.