

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS MAKE MUSIC

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University Congregational Church

April 11, 2010

Reading: Psalm 150 (NRSV)

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament. Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe.

Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

I would like to begin this morning with a reminder about the rules of the Blues.

Now I know that it sounds oxymoronic to suggest that the Blues has rules. But there are some and I want to lift them up for you.

Rules of the Blues

1. Most Blues begin, "Woke up this morning..."
2. "I got a good woman" is a bad way to begin the Blues, unless you stick something nasty in the next line like, "I got a good woman with the meanest face in town."
3. The Blues is simple. After you get the first line right, repeat it. Then find something that rhymes, sort of: "Yes, I got a good woman with the meanest face in town. Got teeth like Margaret Thatcher, and she weighs 500 pound."
4. The Blues is not about choice. You stuck in a ditch, you stuck in a ditch – ain't no way out.
5. Blues cars: Chevys, Fords, Cadillacs, and broken down trucks. Blues don't travel in Volvos, BMWs, or Sport Utility Vehicles. Most Blues transportation is a Greyhound bus or a southbound train. Jet aircraft and company motor pools ain't even in the running. Walkin' plays a major part in the blues lifestyle. So does fixin' to die.
6. Teenagers can't sing the Blues. They ain't fixin' to die yet. Adults sing the Blues. In Blues "adulthood" means being old enough to get the electric chair if you shoot a man in Memphis.
7. Blues can take place in New York City, but not in Hawaii or in any place in Canada. Hard times in Minneapolis or Seattle is probably just clinical depression. Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City are still the best places to have the Blues. You cannot have the blues in any place that don't get rain.
8. A man with male pattern baldness ain't the blues. A woman with male pattern baldness is.

9. Good places for the Blues include highway, jailhouse, an empty bed, bottom of a whiskey glass.
10. Bad places for the Blues include Nordstroms, Gallery openings, Ivy league institutions, and golf courses.
11. You have the right to sing the Blues if: you are older than dirt, you are blind, you shot a man in Memphis, you can't be satisfied.
12. You don't have the right to sing the Blues if: you have all your teeth, you once were blind but now can see, the man in Memphis lived, you have a pension fund.
13. If death occurs in a cheap motel or a shotgun shack, it's a Blues death. Stabbed in the back by a jealous lover is another Blues way to die. So is the electric chair, substance abuse, and dying lonely on a broke-down cot. You can't have a Blues death if you die during a tennis match or while getting liposuction.
14. Some blues names for women: Sadie, Big Mama, Bessie, Fat River Dumpling.
15. Some blues names for men: Joe, Willie, Little Willie, Big Willie.
16. Persons with names like Michelle, Amber, Debbie, and Heather can't sing the Blues no matter how many men they shoot in Memphis.¹

Having made light of the Blues, it remains the case that despite the trauma and tragedy of life Blues musicians continue to make music. When all else fails make music, sing songs, and dance. But the psalmist goes even further. The 150th Psalm suggests that we are to make music for no reason at all. This Psalm does not give us any real reason to sing the praises God other than a vague reference to the idea that God is great and God is good. Unlike many other Psalms this one does not suggest that we sing because God has rescued us, or brought about peace and justice. There is no real reason, just sing and dance!

We make music for the joy of it. That is how we celebrate God. And this does not mean we can only celebrate God on Sunday morning. The Psalm does not declare that sacred music is found only in hymns or chorale music. The Psalmist states that music is made in heaven and on earth. Every breathing thing sings the

¹ Author unknown. "Music Humor – Rules of the Blues," *The Outliers*, 2003; http://outliermusic.com/jokes_rulesoftheblues.htm.

joy of the Creator. There is no realm of life that cannot express the rhythm of creation and its harmony.

The songs of God are sung solo, duet, and quartet. The music of joy is offered in herds, coveys, gaggles, flocks, clutches, congregations and choirs. I think of the Mocking bird that stands on the telephone pole or the top of the tree in the early morning light. She sings for hours, totally unconscious of her audience. Harper Lee wrote in her wonderful novel, “Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy...but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird.” Before Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird* was ever published I was taught it was a sin to kill one.

Music sings, plays, and dances our lives. As you may know, I do my writing at home. It is quieter there and generally I am left alone. One way to really set me off is to stick your head in my study door when I am writing and ask a question. I say nasty things when the phone rings. At the same time I often write with headphones on and music in my ears. The musicians range from Mozart to Springsteen. Very often they energize the act of writing.

I sing when I am mowing, driving the car, or taking a shower. When I am not vocalizing a song it still plays in my head.

Music sings, plays, and dances our lives. Of all the activities of humankind, I think music most expresses our experiences and our dreams. The ordinary patterns of daily speech never quite capture the essence of what it means to be alive, to fear death or hope for love. I believe that more than any other medium music speaks the language of the heart. Music plays the melodies of the soul.

Through music we tell the stories of romance, battle, labor, crime and punishment, protest and affirmation. Think of the songs we sang in the 1960's to protest the Vietnam War and segregation: "We Shall Overcome," "If I Had a Hammer," "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," "Scarborough Fair," "War – What Is It Good For," "World War III Blues," "Eve of Destruction," "Seven o'clock News/Silent Night," "Imagine," "Abraham, Martin, and John," "People Got to Be Free," "Society's Child," "The Times They Are a Changin'," "Sky Pilot," and "Masters of War." These were not just songs against war or racism. They are songs about peace and a dream of how our life might be. They offer a vision of community and God's kingdom. These were the melodies of a new humanity living by the principles of nonviolence and justice.

This is the same function that music serves in the life of faith. Music shares our principles and values; it lifts up our aspirations, and sings the sacred songs of trust. As Luther once said, "Those who sing pray twice." From our Jewish and Christian roots the church has sung its faith with chants, hymns, doxologies, and anthems. In the early church the liturgist would sing, "Let every tongue proclaim." And the congregation would respond, "Jesus Christ is Lord."

Music is sacred to me because it carries the soul. It matters that Christians sing and sing joyfully. I know that I can preach a stellar sermon but if the hymnody is painful and the choral pieces are mediocre, so my preaching is middling. I can preach an indifferent sermon but it is lifted up by superior music. That is true every Sunday morning and in every service of worship I offer such as Maundy Thursday or Christmas Eve or a memorial service.

We sing our faith week in and week out. It trains the soul for all that life will bring to us. Music conditions us to meet God in every circumstance of human experience. The idea is that no matter what happens – even when all else fails – we will rejoice that God is with us. That is the whole idea of the Christian faith. God is with us. When our marriage falls apart, when our 16-year-old granddaughter announces her pregnancy, when the doctor’s prognosis is grim, we sing the songs of faith to be strengthened by the Good News that God is with us.

I read in the *Christian Century* magazine of an Episcopal priest who sings the doxology as he leads the casket from the hearse to the graveside.² Imagine that. I am accustomed to stand at the head of the casket, leading the pallbearers to the grave. Imagine me singing as we processed:

Praise God, the Love we all my share,
Praise God, the Beauty everywhere,
Praise, God the Hope of good to be,
Praise God the Truth that makes us free.

This is the affirmation of our Congregational faith. With such praise on our lips we bring our loved one to the edge of mystery, trusting their future to the God of love, beauty, hope, and truth. Music is the agent that translates the long journey of grief from acceptance to thanksgiving. Music is the broker of life’s reconciliation with loss.

For the same reason I believe it is essential for the church to sing hymns at a memorial service. I can think of no greater repudiation of the final power of death than a congregation singing:

² Thomas Lynch, “The Holy Fire,” *The Christian Century* 127.7 (April 6, 2010): 22-29. Print.

“Joyful, joyful we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love;
 Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.
 Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, drive the dark of doubt away;
 Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.”

And death is muted when the people rise up and sing Eleanor Farjeon’s poem we love so much:

“Morning has broken, like the first morning,
 Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
 Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning.
 Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word.

Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning.
 Born of the one light Eden saw play!
 Praise with elation, Praise every morning,
 God’s recreation of the new day!

When we make a joyful noise as a regular practice our souls automatically know what to sing for irregular times and events. We sing the hymns and doxologies so we will know what to say when death comes like a thief in the night. In my experience with tragedy, we must have a large cache of songs if we are going to be sustained in the flood of tears. There must be a largess of music in our souls if we are going to be able to stand at the grave and say with confidence, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed is the name of the Lord.”

Let me phrase that a different way. Every day I experience a little resurrection. In the monastic tradition it was understood that when we woke up from the night’s sleep we were resurrected. Throughout the course of the day I see the miracle of life in my family, my parishioners, the food I eat, the pleasures of nature, and excitement of a new idea. When I am in my right mind, I remember to praise God. Perhaps it is a spoken word or a song. It may be a quiet realization that this is wonder-filled. The

other day I saw a pheasant couple. The male's ring was a brilliant red, ablaze with color. I thought, "Wow!" That is praise.

It is the practice of praise that carries us through the night.

In her poem, "Invitation," Mary Oliver invites us to a life of praise.

Oh do you have the time
 to linger
 for just a little while
 out of your busy
 and very important day
 for the goldfinches
 that have gathered
 in a field of thistles
 for a musical battle,
 to see who can sing
 the highest note,
 or the lowest,

 or the most expressive of mirth,
 or the most tender?
 Their strong, blunt beaks
 drink the air
 as they strive
 melodiously
 not for your sake
 and not for mine
 and not for the sake of winning
 but for sheer delight and gratitude –
 believe us, they say,
 it is a serious thing
 just to be alive
 on this fresh morning
 in this broken world.
 I beg of you,
 do not walk by
 without pausing
 to attend to this
 rather ridiculous performance.
 It could mean something.
 It could mean everything.
 It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote,

*You must change your life.*³

Spend time each and every day to pause, to listen, and to praise God in God's many sanctuaries.

Finis

(I have written this sermon in thanks to Dr. Don Saliers, Distinguished Professor of Theology and Worship and the Master of Sacred Music Program, at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University; to Bob Scott, Director of Music at University Congregational Church with deep gratitude for Vivaldi's *Gloria* on Palm Sunday and the *Alleluia Chorus* on Easter; and to Dr. Bob and Gladys Rudolph for their friendship and love of artful worship. Grazie tanto, Maestros)

³ Mary Oliver, "Invitation," *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), pp. 18-19.