



First United Church of Oak Park

Singing For Our Lives

Acts 16: 25-34

The Rev. Lydia Mulkey

June 21, 2020

I want to share two pieces of scripture with you this morning, but I'm just going to weave them in rather than offering them ahead of the sermon like I normally would, so before we begin, let's pray.

Oh God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I wonder if you have ever been called on to use your voice in a way that scared you. To speak or sing a word that you knew if it crossed your lips, something would change? And yet, you also felt like you had no choice, but to let those words come out.

The Hebrew Bible Lectionary text for this week is just that. It comes from Jeremiah Chapter 20, where the prophet is lamenting the call of God that is on his life. He does not want to have to say the challenging word God has put in his heart to say, and yet he is compelled by his love of God, of God's hurting people, and of justice. Hear these words from the prophet Jeremiah, the Message paraphrased:

You pushed me into this, GOD, and I let you do it.

You were too much for me.

And now I'm a public joke.

They all poke fun at me.

Every time I open my mouth

I'm shouting, "Murder!" or "Rape!"

And all I get for my GOD-warnings

are insults and contempt.

But if I say, "Forget it!

No more GOD-Messages from me!"

The words are fire in my belly,
a burning in my bones.
I'm worn out trying to hold it in.
I can't do it any longer!

Jeremiah ached for his people to live with justice and righteousness, and his desire for that justice was like a fire that could not be quenched, a word that falls off your tongue before you even know it's there, or a song that lives so deep within your bones that demands to be sung.

What are the songs we sing when we are in the struggle for justice, for peace, for our very lives? This sermon is greatly inspired by one I preached four years ago on a Music Sunday at another church. In it I told three stories of songs sung in moments like Jeremiah's, when the cry for justice just spilled out, in the stories, it spilled out in song.

Story number one happens to come from the Bible. It was approximately the year 60. Paul and Silas had been thrown in jail because they healed a young, enslaved girl and set her free. The work they did to bring justice to that young girl got them thrown in prison, and that's where we find them.

Acts 16: 25-34

25: Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26: All at once there was such a violent earthquake that it shook the prison's foundations. The doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose. 27: When the jailer awoke and saw the open doors of the prison, he thought the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. 28: But Paul shouted loudly, "Don't harm yourself! We're all here!" 29: The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30: He led them outside and asked, "Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?" 31: They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and your entire household." 32: They spoke the Lord's word to him and everyone else in his house. 33: Right then, in the middle of the night, the jailer welcomed them and washed their wounds. He and everyone in his household were immediately baptized.

I don't know what the hymn was that Paul and Silas sang that night, as I'm not up on popular music of the first century, but it got me thinking about what we might

sing in a moment like that. Imprisoned for doing God's work. It had to be something that was so deep in their bones, that it just poured out of them. I can imagine for us, it might be "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound" — sung with the deepest of conviction that justice would prevail: Can we just feel what it's like to sing a song that lives deep within us like that, and sing a verse together? Right there in your home:

Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound, that saved a soul like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.

And as they sang, the chains of injustice shook loose. That's powerful singing. I love that not only did the physical chains of the prisoners' break, but what truly had to change for justice to be possible: the jailer was changed as well. When we are oppressed we can sing for our own freedom, but what truly brings freedom is when the oppressor, the one who holds the power, changes himself. May the songs of protest being sung across our nation now change the hearts of the powerful.

Here's story number two. On March 25, 1965, many had marched all the way from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and as the march concluded, Martin Luther King Jr. got up to speak. He told them that they were right to march for justice. They were right to walk and lift their voices. He reminded them of that old story of Joshua and the way army merely walked around the city of Jericho and, as King said, "The barriers to freedom came tumbling down." Then he reminded them of that old spiritual. This may be one that lives in your bones, too. Let's sing a verse:

Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,
Joshua fit the battle of Jericho,
And the walls come tumbling down.

And then, Rev. Dr. King reminded them of this verse:

Up to the walls of Jericho they marched, spear in hand.
"Go blow them ramhorns," Joshua cried,
"Cause the battle am in my hand."

And King continued, "The battle is in our hands." Indeed, when we have the

courage showed by those who marched to Montgomery, the battle is in our hands. It's not easy, it doesn't always feel like it, and it takes a heck of a lot of courage, but when the march is in your feet and the song is in your voice, the battle for justice is in your hand.

I told you this is based on a sermon for Music Sunday four years ago. I want to tell you what happened that Saturday night before I was to preach it. I went to bed on Saturday night with the sermon basically done, but without the ending I wanted it to have. I decided to sleep on it and hope it would come to me in the morning. I never could have imagined what I would learn when I woke up the next morning. As soon as I woke up, I saw the news, a mass shooting at a gay club in Orlando. Just a few miles from where I grew up. A club that friends of mine had been to in years past. And the ending of my sermon wrote itself.

The third and final story that I knew had to be told and the song I knew had to be sung when I woke up that morning. On November 27, 1978, Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person to be elected to public office, was assassinated at San Francisco City Hall. Thirty-five years later, singer-songwriter Holly Near spoke about that day on the steps of city hall in a service of remembrance. She said:

“We walk in a long tradition of people who have been wounded and hurt, and that rage that we felt after these assassinations was so powerful and we had a choice at that moment to fall prey to grief and rage or to turn those emotions into a movement...”

She says it was after Milk's assassination, on the way to those demonstrations and vigils that followed, that she began to write what she describes as, “this very simple song.” It went like this:

*We are a gentle angry people and we are singing, singing for our lives
We are a gentle angry people and we are singing, singing for our lives....*

The morning after the shooting at Pulse, I woke up to find that we were faced with that same anger, and we had to decide what we will do with it. The Harvey Milk foundation made this statement that Sunday morning that included these words:

HARVEY MILK FOUNDATION STATEMENT on JUNE 12, 2016

“Last night, the worst domestic terror attack since 911 has tragically hit American LGBT families head on -- children, moms, dads, neighbors, friends -- lives that are changed forever. In the days ahead we will come to know the latest victims of hatred -- mostly young men and women who were simply out for a night of dancing and enjoyment of our community during LGBT Pride month. These victims of a hate crime targeting an LGBT club had their futures stolen, had their dreams stolen, their potential contributions stolen from us all. The LGBT Orlando community and our allies in Central Florida are both strong and unified. We send a world of love and prayers to all who are grieving today and to all who will begin the hard journey to recover from untold wounds, both physical and emotional. But our love and prayers are simply not enough. Hate and separation continue to bring forth too much grief, too many stolen lives across the whole world. As we reach out to comfort the Orlando families, and as we support the courage for the injured to heal, may we also have the strength to address and deal with the roots of hatred and separation that target any minority community with violence, any where in the world. May we find a way forward to make this act of horrendous violence a commitment to come together, and so honor the memories of those who were killed today”.

-Stuart Milk,

Co founder Harvey Milk Foundation

We have to remember that racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia are very happy bedfellows. I cannot pretend that my struggle is somehow separate from the struggles of my trans siblings or my Black siblings. This year Pride celebrations across the country have been turned into Black Lives Matter events. That is what we have to do. Until we are all free, none of us are free. And so we have to sing for each other. The morning after the Pulse shooting, Gentle Angry People felt like a song that was burning in my bones, it fell off my tongue before I even knew it needed to be sung. My Black siblings have been singing for their lives for 400 years, and it's past time for me to lend a voice. So many have sung for me. How could I not sing now for others' lives?

I know there is something deep in your bones, there is some fire in your belly, there are words that the Divine has placed on your lips that just have to be said. There is something you just have to do or to be right now. This is the time for all of us to pray and listen for God's calling on our lives, and even if what we are called to do is difficult, as it was for Jeremiah, we have to do it. We have to say it. We have to sing it, with courage. Amen.