

## A New Old Song -- Easter 6B

Sing to the Lord a new song! Over and over in the Book of Psalms we hear and repeat this phrase: “Sing to the Lord a new song.” What on earth is there to make of such an admonition? What in the World are we to do with such an arresting and electrifying refrain?

When Peter and his friends are met by all those unfamiliar, foreign folks, the day becomes one of surprise, amazement and wholesale rethinking. We must bear in mind that the stories we read today are very specifically for us, even though they are about other folks, long, long ago. We can get hung up on the rightness or wrongness of Peter and the others’ hesitation in accepting the spiritual companionship of the gentiles they encounter, inclusiveness is very much the way we always want to operate our house, as we know. But Peter and his friends were not like us. There was no long history of established institutional Christianity that they were protecting from outsiders. The whole idea of following Jesus as central to a godly life was new. What they were trying to do was discover and perhaps understand what God’s criteria were for joining or belonging to the kingdom of believers. They were learning a new song. As Ghandi liked to say, “Our greatness as human beings lies not so much in being able to remake the world—that is the myth of the Atomic Age—as in being able to remake ourselves.”

Last week we heard the Ethiopian say to Philip, “Is there any reason I should not be baptized?” And Philip was immediately awakened to the realization that the answer to that question would always be ‘No.’ Today it’s Peter, who echoes the Ethiopian’s words when he asks, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people?” Of course the answer is ‘No.’ It is clear that the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost

power has descended on everybody in the vicinity, everybody including well, everybody. There is no more legitimate rationale for discrimination. Everybody means everybody.

So this story is for us, but not because we are consciously attempting to exclude anybody from our midst. Goodness knows, we are thrilled when a new somebody shows up at church. No the story is for us because of our ancient, persistent and completely natural human tendency to include by enlisting instead of by loving.

“Sing a new song unto The Lord – with pipes and timbrel and harp – let the very hills ring out their song of joy.” Many of us enjoy the camaraderie and satisfaction of service organizations, Lions, Kiwanis, Rotary. I spent a few hours last Saturday helping feed 500-plus Car Show participants and it was fun, hard work. My clothes will be hanging in the back yard for another week, infused with barbecue smoke. Why does the work we do together with our club friends not fulfill our desire for love and joy? The short answer is, it does. It’s a great feeling to work together on a project for some good cause, and relax together at the end of a long day. So why do we need this religion thing anyway?

God has made us capable of love, hungry for loving action, but also more than a tiny bit careful, reticent, reserved. The truth is that whatever work we do to further God’s Kingdom counts and satisfies, bbq included. Our service work can fulfill us to a significant degree. And yes, the instinct we have to do this work is plenty holy. But there is even more to life than this healthy appetite for goodness, as vital as that is for the world.

The new song we sing is a song of joy that comes from each of our hearts individually. We sing it if we will, all the day long,

and especially on Sunday. This is the true Glee Club – no audition necessary. Peter and his friends were amazed that the Holy Spirit fell on everybody in the vicinity, without exception. It was only when they realized that this was the power prophesied by John the Baptist and promised by Jesus, descending on whomever was there to be affected – without criteria – that they began to abandon status, heritage and purity in favor of universality, openmindedness and blind love. John said, “There cometh one after me more powerful than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire!”

Today’s story is often called “The Gentile Pentecost.” It makes abundantly clear the reality of universally available inspiration. Not just a desire to do good works – vital and therefore welcome as such a desire most certainly is – but the kind of inspiration, in-spir... ation, as in getting filled with spirit that can most certainly blast into our lives with a stunning awareness of God’s boundless love, set our souls on fire with eagerness to reciprocate that love by our treatment of others, and fill our hearts to overflowing with the unique music that God is longing to play for us.

I’m told that Aristotle wrote about there being three kinds of friends: Ones who are useful, who help you get ahead in the World; ones who are amusing, who help you pass the time of day in pleasure; and ones whom you love and who love you, who function as models, teachers and living proof of God’s love at work in our lives. This last group is necessarily small. While there is a wideness in God’s mercy that knows no bounds, and a charitable impulse towards humankind in general that we would never want to restrict, close beloved friends will always

be a select group. It's not whether you choose them or vice-versa, you choose each other.

Today we can reflect on one of the most fundamental and (for most of us) complicated areas of friendship there is: Mom. I know it's politically incorrect to be friends with your kids. It's also a terrible way to be a parent if that's all you do, especially when they're young. But there are attitudes and strategies that we use with our beloved friends that can transform families fundamentally and for the better. What Jesus says to his disciples is this: 'You are no longer my slaves, you are my friends. I have told you everything I know about me and about God – you have the whole scoop – because this is the best I can do. Greater love has no man than to lay down his life for his friends.' Well there is a literal meaning to that, but most of us won't ever have to make a final heroic gesture. So how can we love our kids like Jesus loved us? By laying down our lives before them in the sense of sharing our hopes, fears, dreams, wisdom, and admitting the things we just don't understand. Like we do with our best friends. By singing out our new and unique songs, no matter how goofy or histrionic or unpolished, like we do with our friends. By saying in as many ways as we can how glad we are to be their parents, even if we didn't choose them!

Thus we gather together in families, in these our peaceful communities of worship, in twos and threes, sisters and brothers and good friends; Mothers and their children, Fathers too, in special loving friendships that go beyond the law, beyond tradition and beyond nice behavior, and with Jesus as our inspiration and power, we break forth into mysterious, impractical, transformative new songs that transcend reason. 'Tell me why the stars do shine and I will tell you just why I love you.'