

“The Thing That Saved Us Was the Music”

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

September 29, 2024, Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Celebration of Music

Psalms 95; Selected Verses about Music from Matthew 26; Acts 16; Exodus 15;

Job 38 and Colossians 3



Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost and Celebration of Music. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online.

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

This is a picture taken just beside me here when the piano was on this side. If you don't recognize this face, it is the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, the great hero of progressive causes

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from the Civil Rights movement to the anti-war movement to the nuclear disarmament movement and more—but he is famous in this church and neighborhood for other things.

He lived two doors from here, and we knew him for how much he loved his neighbors of all kinds, whatever our politics or background.

We knew also his passion for music. He played many concerts in this sanctuary and would have loved to be here today, but this photo was taken in the year after the death of his son, when he came to play for himself as the only comfort he could find for his devastated heart.

There is a story that is famous among pastors about a gathering of clergy from all over the country, none of whom knew each other. One of them went to the piano and started singing favorite hymns, inviting them to join him. He sang and talked and laughed with them and by the time they were done they all felt as if they were family.

That was the superpower of Bill Coffin, and we can aspire to it today, we can let the beauty of the music and this shared time talking and singing and laughing and crying together make us one. Please open your hearts to one another with love and care and joy—there are no strangers here today, just other parts of your self you do not yet know.

Call to Worship We are blessed to be in a beautiful place today: this sanctuary, this village, these hills, the trees starting to turn, lovely September days.

One of the greatest blessings of all is the human ability to feel blessed, and be moved by beauty to love and praise and want to nurture and protect that beauty. This is one of the most brilliant gifts of evolution, and another is how often our response to beauty is to do something beautiful in return.

The field of Appreciative Inquiry says that what we focus on we will become, so let us open our hearts wide to all the beauty and goodness we can find here today, and let ourselves bring forth our own beauty and goodness in response.

Let us worship together with thanks and praise.

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One of the most cherished verses in the ancient Hebrew tradition says that at the creation of the universe “the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy.”

Astronomers have just found a black hole emitting the energy of a trillion stars. It would take a spaceship twenty-three million years at the speed of light to travel the length of its jets of energy.

Imagine the ode to joy that morning star is singing!

The ancient Hebrews had no deep space telescopes but they had a profound understanding of the role of life in the universe and the role of music in life. Scientists today join the ancients marveling at the order and harmony that make it possible for life to exist, as if from the very dawn of time the universe had the creation of life in mind.

The ancient Hebrews saw that from the dawn of time the universe had music in mind, as well. The Christian theologian Karl Barth said, a church without music is not a church. Music is at the center of the spiritual life in almost all religions, connecting us to the workings of the universe and the force that created it, however we may imagine that force. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, said “Without music, life would be a mistake.”

Music is inherent to the universe.

But why? Why is it that morning stars and heavenly beings sing, why do birds, coyotes and whales, why did Miriam sing for joy and Jesus sing in parting grief, why did Paul and Silas sing in prison and the early church members use songs to share the Spirit’s wisdom and gratitude to God?

What is the universe’s purpose of music? Leo Tolstoy wrote a book length essay entitled “What Is Art?” He would say that one purpose of music, like all art, is to make us realize that we are one.

The deeply moving film, *The Singing Revolution*, supports Tolstoy. It is about Estonia’s nonviolent revolt against Soviet occupation. Massive songfests with tens of thousands of people had long helped Estonians feel united—but when the Soviets took over, they tried to use music to force Estonians to be divided from themselves and one with the Soviet Union.

The revolution began on the day when one hundred thousand Estonians ended their set of Soviet songs with a cherished song about their love and pride for Estonia. The power of that experience fueled their nonviolent struggle over the coming years against impossible odds.

The film *Amandla: A Revolution in Four Part Harmony* tells a similar story about the South African freedom movement. “The thing that saved us was the music,” it says. Freedom

songs gave the people the power to overcome the massive force of apartheid that had shattered their oneness.

The great black theologian and pastor, James H. Cone, wrote in *The Spirituals and The Blues*, “Black music is unity music.... It moves the people toward the direction of...liberation.” Freedom is another purpose of music.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his essay, “An Experiment in Love,” about the nonviolent Civil Rights freedom movement. He said the Spirit of the universe is “love seeking to preserve and create community.” He saw a “continuing community creating reality that moves through history. He who works against community is working against the whole of creation.”

The universe wants to create beloved community that is all-inclusive and fully one and free, and music is one of the forms of energy that the universe uses to do it.

Music does transformative work within the individual human heart, as well. Edna St. Vincent Millay went to performance of a Beethoven symphony in the 1920s and wrote the sonnet that starts,

Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music, do not cease!
Reject me not into the world again.
With you alone is excellence and peace,
Mankind made plausible, his purpose plain....

The sonnet has been set to music at least three times in the last hundred years because it conveys so much about the role of music in our lives—the sweet beauty that awakens and transports us out of the troubled world to a place of peace where we glimpse a way for humanity to have purpose and meaning and survive.

Millay’s sonnet ends with the line, “Music my rampart, and my only one.” Think of Bill Coffin playing the piano here all alone, with music his only rampart.

Or you may remember the scene in the film, *Selma*, where Martin Luther King Jr. asks Mahalia Jackson to sing over the phone the song, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” King sits with his head down and you can tell that music is his only rampart in that moment. We know that every person who followed King back across Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge must have been singing some spiritual or freedom song to give them courage after being brutally beaten and bloodied there the week before.

Our last hymn today will be Siyahamba, a South African Freedom Song. We need to remember that it was sung by people like those in Selma who had been terrorized by the horrific things white nationalists had done to them and to those they loved. Music was their rampart. Music saved them. It helped them survive their grief and music helped them turn suffering into the courage to lay down their life for the greater cause that the music represented. It made them one, and oneness gave them power.

Today we have very little time left in an election that will be more consequential than any other public event in our lifetime. We have a campaign to wage, we have a bridge to cross that will lead to one of two starkly different futures for our nation and the earth.

“The thing that saved us was the music,” they said in the Civil Rights movement and Estonia and South Africa. It saved them because it enabled them to make sacrifices and take risks and give their all to the cause. What music do you need to help you give all you can in these 36 days?

Let us pray in silence...

Amen.

Some of you may know Eleanor Zue. She has been a social worker in Upper Valley senior centers and a tireless worker for peace, justice and the care of the earth, and music has been central to all she has done. Eleanor requested that I write the hymn we are about to sing. It is a meditation on the way music works in the universe and its purpose in our lives and for the earth.

It's entitled “God's Love Is in Each Song,” and by God I mean the universe, or the Tao, or the “continuing community creating [spirit] that moves through history.” You can translate God into whatever works for you, but the word love you don't have to translate. Love is what has been flowing through our deepest song from the first morning stars to the crickets playing their little fiddles in our fields today. Here it is:

God's love is in each song,
In thrush or cricket singing,
In winter's pause, not long:
A rest between bells ringing.
When red-wings first return
We hear earth's voice release

And sense God's love and yearn,
Like northward turning geese.

Each voice that sings its part,
Each "Yes!" cried by creation,
Each yearning of the heart,
Each marvel of migration,
Each sound, then rest, then sound,
Each pulse or wing that beats,
Springs from one well, one ground,
One call that each repeats.

We join love's flowing course
For our one part and measure.
We sing to praise our source,
And serve and save this treasure.
God, help us lift our voice.
May we sing, true and strong,
So all earth may rejoice,
One life, one love, one song.

Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz
Yellow maple leaves
dance on the wings of the wind
yet they are falling.