

March 16, 2014
Claire Feingold Thoryn
Theme: Struggles
Sermon: Struggles

The text in Arial was sung by our alto soloist, Caitlin Felsman.
The text in Times New Roman was spoken by Rev. Claire.

Song Lyrics: American Tune by Paul Simon

Many's the time I've been mistaken
And many times confused
Yes, and I've often felt forsaken
And certainly misused
Oh, but I'm all right, I'm all right
I'm just weary to my bones
Still, you don't expect to be
Bright and bon vivant
So far away from home, so far away from home

I don't know a soul who's not been battered
I don't have a friend who feels at ease
I don't know a dream that's not been shattered
Or driven to its knees
Oh, but it's all right, it's all right
For lived so well so long
Still, when I think of the road
We're traveling on
I wonder what went wrong
I can't help it, I wonder what's gone wrong

And I dreamed I was dying
And I dreamed that my soul rose unexpectedly
And looking back down at me
Smiled reassuringly
And I dreamed I was flying
And high above my eyes could clearly see
The Statue of Liberty
Sailing away to sea
And I dreamed I was flying

Oh, we come on the ship they call the Mayflower
We come on the ship that sailed the moon
We come in the age's most uncertain hour

And sing an American tune
Oh, it's all right, it's all right
It's all right, it's all right
You can't be forever blessed
Still, tomorrow's going to be another working day
And I'm trying to get some rest
That's all I'm trying to get some rest

Reading: "Heart Labor" by Maggie Anderson

When I work too hard and then lie down,
even my sleep is sad and all worn out.
You want me to name the specific sorrows?
They do not matter. You have your own.
Most of the people in the world
go out to work, day after day,
with their voices chained in their throats.
I am swimming a narrow, swift river.
Upstream, the clouds have already darkened
and deep blue holes I cannot see
churn up under the smooth flat rocks.
The Greeks have a word, *parapono*,
for the complaint without answer,
for how the heart labors, while
all the time our faces appear calm
enough to float through in the moonlight.

Sermon: Struggles

The worship theme this month is "Struggles." The sermon this morning is a dialogue between the language of sorrow and struggle, and the musical embodiment of it.

Many's the time I've been mistaken
And many times confused
Yes, and I've often felt forsaken
And certainly misused
Oh, but I'm all right, I'm all right
I'm just weary to my bones
Still, you don't expect to be
Bright and bon vivant
So far away from home, so far away from home

“You want me to name the specific sorrows?
They do not matter. You have your own.”

Paul Simon’s “American Tune” is a haunting and sad song. It’s that kind of sad song that I just love listening to on repeat. Sometimes sad music is so much more satisfying than happy music. It gives voice to the sorrow and struggles in our hearts and soothes them so much more than any joyful noise.

It was only this week that I learned from Thomas that the melody Paul Simon uses in this song is from the St. Matthew Passion chorale by Bach. Bach’s chorale gave us the Good Friday hymn “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” a hymn about Jesus on the cross. When Bach was writing his Passion chorale he actually borrowed this melody from another earlier musician who used it as a love song. So this song has been gifted down the years from one musician to another, one sad song to another. The lyrics have changed; the setting has changed; but the sweet and sad melody line has essentially stayed the same.

The hymn, “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” begins:

O sacred Head, now wounded,
with grief and shame weighed down,
Now scornfully surrounded
with thorns, Thine only crown;

Our hymnal only has two of the original eleven verses to this hymn—you can find the hymn at number #265, and it has been sung once a year here for the past decade or so at the Good Friday Tenebrae service.

Paul Simon is one of the most incredible musicians of our time, and he has acknowledged in many interviews how so much of his music explores spiritual themes. So I feel sure that he gave great consideration to taking a song about one man’s suffering set to a German melody and turning it into a song about humanity’s suffering and titling it “American tune.” On the cross, Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and in the song, Simon uses that same word, heavy with meaning: “forsaken.”

I don’t know a soul who’s not been battered
I don’t have a friend who feels at ease
I don’t know a dream that’s not been shattered
Or driven to its knees

How has your soul been battered? Do you have a dream that has been shattered?

Even as a child I didn’t understand why my Christian friends seemed so concerned about Jesus’ suffering as somehow being unique and worse than anyone else’s. As a Unitarian Universalist, it has always seemed to me that many people suffer similar pains and indignities, and many have suffered far worse. Jesus felt forsaken, he was battered and misused. And since him, so too have

millions of others had their crosses to bear: abuse; violence; war; hunger; heartbreak; grief; illness; loneliness; the wounds of the body and the wounds of the soul.

Most of the people in the world
go out to work, day after day,
with their voices chained in their throats.

A popular saying goes: “Be kind; for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” There are debates over who first said this phrase and how it was originally stated. Whoever said it, it is true, and so easily forgotten. We walk around carrying our own battles like bricks in our purses or monkeys on our backs. And the weight and discomfort of our own battles can make us forget the heart labors of those we meet.

The poet writes:

The Greeks have a word, *parapono*,
for the complaint without answer,
for how the heart labors, while
all the time our faces appear calm
enough to float through in the moonlight.

Parapono is one of those words without easy translation. It means the sort of complaint, or heart wound, that you can't let go of: it haunts us, again and again, it colors our lives, our relationships, our joys and our sorrows. It is a restlessness, a yearning, a regret, a dissonant chord. We may spend our lives trying to put it down and find ourselves circling back inevitably to pick it up again. Heart labor is hard labor.

I don't know a dream that's not been shattered
Or driven to its knees

Oh it's all right, it's all right
You can't be forever blessed
Still, tomorrow's going to be another working day
And I'm trying to get some rest
That's all I'm trying to get some rest.

The specific sorrows do not matter. You have your own.
Why do our chained-up voices find solace in sad music?

As it turns out musicologists and sociologists have been asking that question for a long time. I came across a BBC radio program by the journalist Stephen Johnson called “Discovering Music.” Johnson has described his struggles with clinical depression, that “fathomless black hole inside a person's head.” He describes feeling “trapped in a hopelessness which seemed beyond control.” And one of the ways he found his escape was through the music of the composer Shostakovich.

“Not jaunty stuff but ...huge, catastrophic dissonances... Music so dark and convulsed in suffering it seemed to resonate with his own despair.”

Shostakovich’s music was painfully born from the brutal horrors of Stalin’s regime. He saw cruelty beyond our imagination. And yet, he left us this gift of his genius, a gift that can be given to anyone who suffers and has ears to hear.

Stephen Johnson talked to Paul Robertson, the lead violinist of the Medici Quartet, who has studied the connection between music and science. Robertson said:

Music can give you a ladder out of somewhere extreme and painful. It provides a *locus of control*: you can externalise your feelings, examine them and hence become aware that change is possible. It shows that something beautiful can come out of pain. It begins to give it meaning and everything can be borne if it has meaning.’

The Medici Quartet has played in hospitals and psychiatric wards. At first the quartet thought they should play happy music, to cheer up the patients. But the patients requested sad, tragic music. It was finding their own pain mirrored in the sadness of the music that gave some consolation to the inconsolable.

I am not familiar with the work of Shostakovich. But I loved the rock group REM when I was a teenager—I could still probably sing every word to their album *Monster*. They wrote a lot of sad songs, songs in a minor key, and one of the most famous REM songs is called “Losing My Religion.”

Oh life, it’s bigger
It’s bigger than you
And you are not me
The lengths that I will go to
The distance in your eyes
Oh no, I’ve said too much
I’ve said enough

A year or so ago some anonymous trickster digitally reworked the song “Losing My Religion” so that every note that had been in a minor key—sung or instrumental—is transposed into a major key. Cole Porter wrote a break-up song that goes “How strange the change from major to minor.” The change from minor to major can be just as strange!

(Sing in major scale)
Oh life, it’s bigger
It’s bigger than you
And you are not me
The lengths that I will go to
The distance in your eyes
Oh no, I’ve said too much
I’ve said enough

The song has become a “chirpy little ditty.” (Huffpost)
Whoever was behind the “major-scaling” did the same thing with a well-known Doors song and a Metallica song. It is a music theory lesson made real. In a major key, the once-sad song feels false. It has lost its power. It feels like someone smiling with lots of teeth, when behind the smile they really feel angry and sad. All wrong.

I heard on NPR recently that a recent study showed a small percentage of people do not feel any emotion when they hear music. It just doesn't affect them in any way. It is as though they are missing tastebuds in their ears. The sound goes in, it is ingested—heard by the ears, but the flavor is completely missing.

I find that terribly sad, because music is one way we can connect to our deepest emotions, embrace them and release them. When music makes us weep we are connecting not only with something deep inside, but with something holy and transcendent.

Scientifically, John Dacey has told me, tears release adrenalin, and that can be healing to our bodies. But spiritually, and theologically, tears have great meaning. In the Jewish tradition, Christian tradition, and in religious traditions way more ancient than either of them, tears and music have long been a way that humans connect to the presence of God, or mourn the absence of God. One strain of Jewish mystical theology holds that in God's innermost chamber, God is weeping, God's heart is broken by humanity's suffering.

Sad music is a way to experience the Divine.

I don't need to name the specific sorrows.
You have your own.
You know what it feels like to have your voice chained in your throat.
You have been mistaken, forsaken, confused, misused.

When I am sad and struggling, I don't want to listen to Pharell sing his pop hit “Happy.”

Clap along if you know that happiness is the truth
(Because I'm happy)

What does that even mean? It's just annoying. (Actually I personally find that song annoying even when I am happy.)

If I summed up my theology in a sentence, it would be, “We are in this together.” In music we can find ourselves embraced by someone—someone who may have been dead for hundreds of years—who also has experienced pain and grief and heartbreak. In their company, we begin to find healing.

I love the new hymn we sang earlier by my friend Aaron. Aaron, like many of us, has been through times of grief, pain, and depression. Every night he sings a lullaby to his two year old son, the hymn "Though I May Speak with Bravest Fire," which is #34 in our grey hymnals.

Though I may speak with bravest fire
And have the gift to all inspire
And have not love
My words are vain
As sounding brass, and hopeless gain.

The tune for that hymn is called "Gift of Love." And Aaron took the Gift of Love and wrote the hymn we sang today:

Sometimes the weight of days is real
And what is Holy seems concealed
I want to know, when life feels small,
A Life that's bigger than my fall.

A hymn sung from father to son, was born again into a new hymn, a prayer sung by a man to his God. Even grown-ups sometimes need lullabies. Even when we are caring for others, we too still need love and care, we all need someone to show up for us in flesh, in blood and bone, in hands extended. We need to be known. Our cross to bear may not look like a cross to someone else, but only you know how it feels.

Your sorrows are your own.
And yet they are shared by all of us.
Release the voice chained in your throat.

We are in this together.
We don't have to do this alone.
Whatever your struggle, your burden,
when life feels small,
there is a Life that is bigger than your fall.

When the Holy is concealed, we can seek it,
in music, in prayer, in silence, in tears.

And I dreamed I was dying
And I dreamed that my soul rose unexpectedly
And looking back down at me
Smiled reassuringly
And I dreamed I was flying
And high above my eyes could clearly see
The Statue of Liberty
Sailing away to sea
And I dreamed I was flying

Oh, we come on the ship they call the Mayflower
We come on the ship that sailed the moon
We come in the age's most uncertain hour
And sing an American tune
Oh, it's all right, it's all right
It's all right, it's all right
You can't be forever blessed
Still, tomorrow's going to be another working day
And I'm trying to get some rest
That's all I'm trying to get some rest

May all of us here find the rest we seek.
And though our complaint may never be answered,
Our struggles never truly ceased,
May we find a raft amid the narrow swift river,
a place of calm that can float us through the moonlight.
May we be open to receiving blessings when they are offered,
And may we in turn be the hands extending blessing
to someone else,
The face of the Holy, made flesh in our blood and bone.

Amen.

For further reading and listening, here are the writings that influenced in this sermon:

<http://www.stephen-johnson.co.uk/reviews/discovering-music.php>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/shostakovich/feature.shtml>

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2014/03/06/286786987/for-some-people-music-truly-doesnt-make-them-happy>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/22/opinion/sunday/why-we-like-sad-music.html>

<http://wordscene.wordpress.com/tag/to-parapono/>

Majorscaled REM video: <http://vimeo.com/57685359>