



“FREE THE MUSES!”

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 92:1-4, 12-15

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, June 16, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

One: Hear the Word of God.

ALL: OUR EARS AND HEARTS ARE OPEN.

Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15

92:1 It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, Most High; 92:2 to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, 92:3 to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre. 92:4 For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. 92:12 The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. 92:13 They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. 92:14 In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, 92:15 showing that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

(Sing Last Line of Prayer for Illumination Again)

We are listening, Spirit speak to us.

Reminders about decolonization (slides)

Slide #1: Decolonization: “involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to the making of space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems.” (University of Essex Library)

Slide #2: Rev. Dr. Kelle Brown’s post “Decolonizing from Within”

Slide #3: Those active in decolonizing will desire liberation over comfort. They will prioritize the freedom of those impacted in the church and beyond over tradition, nostalgia, practice, or what has worked in the past.”

The decolonizing church creates ways to honestly evaluate its history and strategize about the future.

Slide #4: Decolonizing the church requires honest reflection as to the anti-Blackness, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia prevalent in our liturgies, music, faith formation,

and study of sacred text. The faithful must turn their reflection into moral and ethical action.

Slide #5: Becoming a church in the process of decolonizing requires expecting transformation and change. This church understands the risk implicit in evolution and will not shy away from the difficult work involved.

Music: comes from a Greek word *mousike* (*moos e kee*) meaning art of the muses or pertaining to the muses. Muses: Goddesses that inspired the arts–literature, poetry, music.

Mythology that these 9 goddesses, daughters of Zeus, when called on would whisper into the ears of those creating art–poetry, music, sculpture, story, song.

Music’s ethereal, transcendent, mystery–the whispers of a Spirit, a wisdom, a flow beyond us.

Neurobiology of Music and embodiment

- Our brain is actually an instrument “neuro symphonies”
- Our brain is actively engaged in making music.
- Which also means that there is a uniqueness to the ways each of us receives and co-creates music. We are all musicians.
- “Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain” by neurologist Oliver Sacks: there is no single music center in the human brain. Several (dozen) networks in the brain are involved.
- William James called it our “susceptibility to music”
- Music is probably more primal than language–and it can do some things language cannot do.
- It can “describe” emotions, feelings without words. And it can evoke emotions.
- Music can evoke not just feelings, but capacities for connection–music can curate empathy–the sensations of empathy–not simply thoughts, but the embodied sensations of feeling with, feeling alongside, emotional accompaniment. In this way, music can tend our cellular connections and interdependence. Music can teach our bodies the sensations of shared humanity, friendship, love, joy, connection.
- Friedrich Nietzsche said, “We listen to music with our muscles.”
- Musical memory–is tenacious for human beings. Even those who might not be able to verbally replicate it. We think it, we hear it in our brains, in our memory stores.

And music elicits memory of all kinds. Studies around the capacity of music to call up memory in those with dementia.

- We are made for music (nervous system, auditory systems, hearts, our muscles): musicophilia, primal, across cultures.
- Music is therapeutic for people with all kinds of neurological conditions.
- Music can enhance neuroplasticity—it can be used to enhance, heal, and expand our brain’s capacity for learning new things.
- Music does more than come in through our ears, it activates nerve cells that match sound frequencies, hormones are called up, neuro-circuits are recruited, including pre-motor circuits—that can fire before our brain communicates a particular plan of action—we feel like we need to move. Our body is an instrument in the symphony
- Certain frequencies evoke certain kinds of music.
- Listening to music 10, 30, 60 minutes a day improves heart rate variability—probably because of the ways just listening to music changes our breathing.
- Music motivates. Listening to music before you engage in work can increase your focus and help you move forward with tasks.
- Even for those without hearing, “musical hallucinations” occur in the brain and activate the same areas that are activated in actually hearing music. The brain creates its own auditory stimulation when it is not getting it externally.

White supremacy and music

- One right way
- The equation of certain kinds of music with sacred music to the exclusion of others
- In churches, music can function as a policing of culture and a choir can be highly performative and become like a church within a church, a clique.
- Presbyterians: our roots from Protest and the use of the psalms as a form of resistance. This fed the development of our rich tradition of hymnody. When any heritage becomes limiting, it needs to always be in conversation with history and context and impact, and with the ways we continue to learn about music and language and what the human family needs.
- During the 16th and 17th centuries, the French Huguenots (French Protestants) followed the teachings of John Calvin, the theological father of Presbyterians (ruled by Elders) sang the psalms because that was the way to memorize them when they might not be able to read or have a way to read them. They would meet in secret to avoid imprisonment and execution by the Roman Catholic King. Many fled the country in the 17th century.
- Gary and Lenore’s ppt at the Matthew 25 summit

- Questions to ask ourselves about music in worship:
 - Is it really inclusive?
 - Language
 - Gender, sexuality, race, body ability
 - Questions about faith and religion
 - Different cultures taught by those from those cultures
 - Is it really honest?
 - Does it address pain points in the world?
 - Does it disrupt the status quo and help us see things in new ways?
 - Does it make us want to sing?
- Treat hymns like relics// to confederate statues; songs as monuments that harm people.
- Cultural hegemony in white churches—the need for cultural humility to unravel the harm of superiority.

Language and theology

- Many traditional hymns contain problematic theological ideas that can do harm.
- Atonement theology is plentiful in hymns
- Patriarchal language
- Militaristic language
- Nationalism
- Christian triumphalism
- Chosenness
- Conquest and the seizing of land.
- So, the rewriting of lyrics and the learning of new music is required for us to practice mutual liberation.
- Knowing how powerfully music can shape us, we can't keep singing the same songs and lyrics that have enslaved and oppressed.

Cultural appropriation

- Cultural awareness and humility
- In white dominant spaces we must be very intentional about the ways “white sprawl” can normalize cultural appropriation

- Part of the colonizing that has been fueled by white supremacy is not only the destruction of other cultures, but also the appropriation of other cultures and then acting as if it is our own.
 - We must practice, practice, practice how, why, when and who when it comes to the ways we welcome different kinds of music into our shared repertoire. Who taught us the music, who invited us to use it, how do we honor the cultural richness and stay mindful and careful in terms of the way power is used in white dominant spaces.
 - In this way, music is also a teacher and an opportunity to heal and to connect.
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Creativity

- Music can express, and heal. It can repair and reveal. It can evoke, provoke, and invoke. We can decolonize worship without music—both as a part of what gets decolonized and as an instrument, a tool in the decolonizing task.
- Our closing song today will be “Joyful, Joyful.” This is Beethoven’s Ode to Joy coupled with a poem written by Henry Van Dyke in 1907. It is a song that has a history. And it is a song that many have adapted to their cultural contexts with flourishes, instruments, and rhythms. Today we are going to sing it coupled with “Greatly to be Praised” by Jessy Dixon, a gospel singer, composer, and songwriter who helped to popularize gospel music. He played keyboard for Earth, Wind, and Fire, and toured for several years with Paul Simon.
- Beethoven’s Ode to Joy
 - Ode to Joy was the final movement of Beethoven’s final symphony, symphony #9.
 - Wrote it when he was deaf. Having debilitating headaches.
 - In the midst of war and strife and deep personal loss
 - He was gripped by the desire to write music that could help free us
 - Friedrich Schiller’s poem, he heard as a young man, inspired Beethoven to dream of a world where all could be free, and where friends and creativity flourished, and it was his desire to put this desire, this aspiration, this Joy of human freedom, to music.
 - The longing for freedom for the whole human family—the freedom to forge true friendships with all that is. That sounds like the biblical idea of right relationship.

Music is part of what makes us human. And music can help us heal the human family. The elegance of God's provisions for our well-being is the joy of our collective resistance to oppression and our collective commitment to mutual liberation. May Spirit's muses be free to whisper the songs of freedom to us, may we have the hearts to receive them, may they be music not just to our ears, but to our hearts.

Thanks be to God.