

Robert Sirota

Sermon for Sunday, February 23, 2014

King's Chapel

Boston

*Come, thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart
to sing thy grace!*

*Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of
loudest praise.*

*Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming
tongues above.*

*Praise the mount! Oh, fix me on it, mount of God's
unchanging love.*

It is an indescribable honor to be here today, to have these great musicians playing a new work of mine. I want to thank Heinrich Christensen for his profound musicianship, but also and particularly for his enormous generosity of spirit in embracing not only this project, but in being a champion of music by living composers. By so doing, he continues the distinguished tradition of creativity and innovation of past Music Directors of King's Chapel, including Virgil Thomson and Daniel

Pinkham, a composer and organist I knew well from our years in Boston in the 70s and 80s.

And as if it were not enough of a privilege to have a service at King's Chapel that features my own compositions, I was then asked to preach the sermon, immediately transforming the experience from one of pleasant distinction to surreal terror. In any event, I want to thank the Rev. Joy Fallon for hosting us, and want to assure her that I will try not to bring dishonor on this venerable pulpit.

First, some personal history:

My own journey is one of an adult convert to Christianity. Here's the short version. Raised a secular Jew, I married the daughter of a Lutheran minister. We were united in our love for each other, in our belief in the power of music, and in our disillusionment with organized religion. Some 15 years into our marriage, in the mid-80s God broke through to us with such force and passion that Vicki is now the Canon Pastor and Vicar of the Congregation of the Cathedral of St John the Divine, and I... well today I'm preaching the Gospel at King's Chapel.

The Psalm appointed for today, begins:

Teach me, O Lord the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.

A tall order. Learn how to live a Godly, sanctified life, and then stick to it until you die. How is this possible? Imbedded in the music we are singing and playing today is the strong message of faith, service and transcendent love that provides the answer.

The four pieces in your Order of Worship that bear my name are actually the movements of a single work, ***Apparitions***, getting its first hearing at this morning's service. The four American hymns I have chosen to write variations on all come out of the early 19th century, a period from 1790 to 1840 that church historians call the Second Awakening. Where the First or Great Awakening of the early 1730s and 40s began to define American piety as unique and distinctive, the Second Awakening was a time of evangelical fervor and expansion. Congregationalists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians were at the forefront of the First Awakening; the spiritual leaders of the Second Awakening arose from the Methodists,

Baptists, and Disciples. Stirring revivalists like Francis Asbury and Charles Grandison Finney rejected the idea that sinful people were unable to save themselves, in favor of a belief that God had bestowed on all the ability to come to Christ.

This new focus on personal piety and redemption produced a flowering of creativity in hymn writing. Some of the hymn tunes, like “Come thou fount of every blessing” to the tune known as *Nettleton*, or *Wondrous Love*, originated as secular folk songs. *Wondrous Love* appears in several hymn collections of the 1830’s, some of which were notated in “shape-notes” a system of using a different shape for each pitch as an aid for the congregation to read the music.

While we have published sermons from that era, we can only imagine the fervent power of the preachers of that time. What **has** come down to us in full force over these two centuries, are the hymns, and particularly for me, the hymn tunes, which clearly declare the depth of faith and the strength of conviction of those who came before us.

In the treatments I have given the four hymns I chose from this period, my fevered post-modern mind dances between exultation and doubt. To me, these glorious tunes project either transcendent serenity and joy, as in “Come thou fount of every blessing” (*Nettleton*) and “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need” (*Resignation*), or fierce piety, as in Jesus Calls Us (*Restoration*) and “What Wondrous Love”. That they are able to do this employing the simplest of means – all of them are based almost exclusively upon a 5-note or pentatonic scale- is part of their genius. I have called my work ***Apparitions*** because my treatment of them is often not a direct transcription of the melodies, but more like a refraction of their essence through the prism of my own experience.

What do I mean when I refer to the “fierce piety” of a hymn like “Wondrous Love”? To explain this, let me first quote from a chapter on Music as Theology in a book by my wife Victoria Sirota, called Preaching to the Choir: Claiming the Role of Sacred Musician. Then, with the help of Heinrich and the Choir, we will do a brief demonstration.

Vicki asserts that the music itself, separate from the words, conveys its own theology. In discussing the “interior singing” of ascetic practice she states:

*Music may be a vehicle for theology in “exterior singing”, but it **is** theology in “interior singing.” Like the ascetic, the artist/composer/musician struggles to overcome the needs of self in order to uncover a greater truth. Great works of art engage cosmic issues and eschatological hopes and are, therefore, in touch with that deep interior singing which is the divine voice. They allow us to know God directly through our senses.*

To demonstrate this idea that the music itself conveys theological meaning separate from the words, I have written a different hymn tune to What Wondrous Love, which I will sing for you now:

Now let’s hear the powerful setting of the original hymn tune:

All four hymns in *Apparitions* sing of an absolute faith – an unassailable conviction that God IS and that love is redemptive. I think it's my longing for this, as well as my own struggle with darkness and unbelief, which makes them so attractive to me. What sort of life did our forebears have together that gave them the godly grounding to produce such hymns as testament to their faith? Is such unqualified conviction even possible in today's broken world?

God's call is constant, insistent, persistent, but most of all, patient. If you don't get it the first time, or the hundredth time, it will come around again. Looking back on my life, I realize that God was speaking to me from the beginning, but that most of the time I was not listening.

In 1969, while in our junior year at Oberlin - the college that counts Charles Grandison Finney among its founders – my wife Vicki and I were married. One of the reasons we could get married while undergraduates was that we found off-campus housing, something almost nonexistent in Oberlin at that time. In return for some light household duties, we took a room on the 2nd floor

of Mrs. Reed's home. Mrs. Reed was an elderly widowed African-American woman who had come from her native Kentucky to Oberlin early in the twentieth century to work at the College. I'm ashamed to say I can't tell you much more about her, because I was far too preoccupied with my own studies in composition and piano as well as our brand-new marriage to really pay very much attention to her. Although I probably knew it then, I now could not even tell you her first name.

One evening, knowing that Vicki and I were both music majors, Mrs. Reed asked us "do you know shape-notes?"

We had no idea what she was talking about. She went on to explain what they were, but her presentation did not produce much more than a brief, polite reaction from us. After all, we were studying classical music at a major conservatory, and had very little interest in Southern hymnody. Imagine what I could have learned from this woman. Forgive me, Mrs. Reed.

We tend to get caught up in ourselves, and we don't see the ghosts that hover around us. Without

our knowing it, we inhabit a spiritual landscape laid out by those who came before us.

The hamlet of 1200 people in central coastal Maine where our family has had a home for the past 27 years is now called Searsmont, but its original name when it was founded in 1814 was Fraternity Village. Fraternity Village is surrounded by other little towns in Waldo County, whose names similarly reflect the faith and aspirations of their founders: Hope, Union, Liberty. In our twenty-first century sophistication, we think of these names as quaint, charming, utopian. In truth, these place names are part of the legacy left to us by the souls who forged these towns out of the wilderness. This clear and unequivocal vision of civic virtue guided by unwavering faith is something that today we have trouble wrapping our heads around. I think this is one of the reasons I have become fascinated, to the point of obsession, with early American hymn tunes. Through them, I feel like I am reaching back through time, throwing off our overloaded post-modern perspective, to engage in a conversation with those who came before us.

So what does it mean to live in the space carved out for us by these faithful people, to live in Hope, Union, Liberty, and Fraternity? Their faithfulness has created a place for us, and our task is to continue the good work. This is what I think is meant in today's passage in Corinthians:

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Part of my job while I walk this earth is to make music, and to place it on the altar. But each of us has a reason to be here, and I am absolutely sure that your contribution to building the Kingdom of God is unique and indispensable. In word, in music, but most of all, in silence, listen for God's call: constant, insistent, persistent, but most of all, patient.

*Jesus calls us! By thy mercies,
Savior may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience,
Serve and love thee, best of all.*

May you experience the fullness of God's love, and
may your life and work be dedicated to the
building of God's kingdom.

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and
Sanctifier

Amen