



"The Peaceable Kingdom" by John August Swanson

He is the way.
Follow Him through the land of unlikeliness;
You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.
W.H. Auden, 1907-1973

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We all have songs. We all have stories.
We all have good times and times when things go wrong.
And that's life—the heartache and the glory.
The heartbeat of life is in our stories and our songs.
Julie Shannon, "The Christmas Schooner"

Training My Ear, Finding My Voice

The purpose of religion is to tune our hearts to God's song.
Raav Cook

I was raised in the church. Since the time I was a boy attending Catholic grade school, I was fascinated with the music and often played guitar at Mass along with the nuns. Later, I learned how to play piano as well. I began to sing in my parish choir. When we built a new pipe organ while I was in high school, I was recruited to play the early Mass on Sunday mornings. Having no formal training, I learned in the hot seat—where, ever since, some of my best learning has taken place. So while my classmates were flipping burgers and mopping floors, I was pumping the pedals at 7:00am every Sunday.

I grew accustomed at an early age to the rhythms of parish life and the sights, sounds and smells of the liturgical year. I learned through hymns, scripture and sacred texts the lessons of faith and of God's love for God's people. Indeed, from an early age, I was aware of a God who spoke to me through song.

The Sisters of the Incarnate Word ran my grade school. A progressive order ahead of their time, they were active in the community and in the church at large, living their vows to incarnate the divine, to be God's presence in the world. This is what they taught us—that to love God is to be God's presence in the world, to make God's word incarnate.

In a Catholic high school run by the Franciscans, I first felt called by God to share my gifts in the ministries of the church. I entered college seminary, and after two years left disillusioned. Years later, despite a successful career in sacred music, I left the Roman Catholic Church altogether. The church had begun to feel more like a social club to me—full of rules and regulations that made full inclusion and participation in the sacraments conditional. All this seemed to contradict the message the Sisters taught us in grade school.

After a period of wandering in my own spiritual wilderness, God led me to a welcoming and hospitable American Baptist congregation. Through my ministry at the church as a musician and lay leader and my position at The Night Ministry, the dying embers of my call to full-time ministry started to rekindle. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, I recalled what it felt like to have my heart burn. I enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at Chicago Theological Seminary to explore again the possibility of ordained ministry.

I expected to follow the ordination process in the American Baptist Church under the care of my supportive congregation. But it seems God had yet more turns for me to take.

The pastors were concerned that the congregation, having previously endured acrimony and division over homosexuality in the church, was not prepared to support a gay candidate and further, even if I negotiated the process successfully, that there would not be adequate work within the denomination for me.

Fortunately, for me, I was then serving as a pastoral intern at St. Pauls UCC in Lincoln Park. It was there where I felt the unconditional welcome of the UCC. Not only was it okay for a gay candidate to serve as a musician (as it had been among the Baptists), but at St. Pauls I was also welcome in the pulpit and in the classroom with adults and children. Here, my orientation was seen simply as a part of who I am—neither something to hide nor to broadcast. Here I could speak authentically from my own experience as a person. And that’s all I wanted, all I’ll ever need—to be able to speak authentically, to minister with my whole being.

Upon further study, it became clear that the UCC was to be my new home. Founded in part by pilgrims seeking to worship on their own terms, I discovered that the UCC is an uniquely American denomination rooted in Congregational and Evangelical and Reformed traditions. The UCC professes and embodies a decisively incarnational theology, a confident belief in a God who speaks still, who creates still, who is still about the transformation of the earth and all its creatures. Such theological strains resonate deeply with my own understanding of the divine.

My years of study and formation at CTS were both gift and blessing. I received a progressive education rooted in a solid understanding of the long and rich trajectories of Christian thought—and it has served me well in my ministry. The ability to explore where theology intersects with the world in which we live, with all its joys and challenges has prepared me to respond to the variety of questions of faith—both the profound and

the mundane, the anguished and the hope-filled—that have been presented to me in my ministry.

An Old, Old Song Book

We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind,
to notions of our day and place, crude, partial, and confined;
No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred;
O God, grant yet more light and truth to break forth from your Word.
John Robinson's farewell to the Pilgrims

One of the things I respect most about the United Church of Christ is the freedom and responsibility every member has to discover and deepen her or his own faith and to wrestle with life's questions in an open forum. The religion of my youth granted me much less freedom and, in fact, seemed to be hopelessly entrenched in a language of faith fostered long ago when the world was flat and God was a cosmic vending machine, doling out blessings and curses as he (yes, he) saw appropriate.

How good it was to find myself on new terrain, to find a community of faith in which it is okay to agree with John Spong when he writes: "There is no future for Christianity unless the essence of Christian truth can be extracted from the framework of the ancient past."¹ I believe that the story and the song that is Christianity is beautiful, engaging, and full of truth. I also believe that it's time to reharmonize the tune, that it's time to reorchestrate and update it. The question, then, is how do we honor our rich inheritance while expressing our story in a song more pleasant and enticing to the ears of our generation and generations to come?

¹ John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (Harper: San Francisco, 1991) p. 134

The Church of Christ: Listening to the Bible Again

Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life;
Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life.
Words of life and beauty, teach me faith and duty:
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.
Philip P. Bliss

We honor our rich inheritance by treating the Bible as a living book with a soul. I am grateful that the UCC is reaching out to spiritual seekers who hunger for an authentic faith suited to the challenges of today's world, that we strive to embody the truth, that there are still churches in the world where Christian faith is intellectually honest as well as spiritually and psychologically good for people, all people. God is indeed still speaking, still creating.

The Bible, then, is a collection of stories that lead us in our explorations, that show us where seekers of times past have found God—and have been changed. But the Bible is not understood in this way in many places. Many people interpret the Bible literally when it reinforces their preconceived moralistic opinions about things. The object becomes to tell people what to do and not to do. People who have had enough of such simplistic moral arguments simply do not hear, do not join in the song. The church becomes irrelevant in the world. Since such voices are numerous, loud and powerful, the rest of us Christians have to speak up. We have to let the world know that we are here and the Bible is not a weapon of judgment. We have to let the world know that we really do have Good News to share.

Part of the Good News we have to share is that, at the heart of our faith is a remarkable and amazing Book. It is called the Bible, and it is a spacious Book of soul. It is a repository of stories that can take us by the hand and lead us into the heights and depths of human imagination. The Bible can lead us into a world of wonder and awe, where we can reflect upon what it means to be a human being, where you can reflect upon what it means to be you, where you can reflect upon what it means to live this life that you've been given so you can sing your song without shame and tell your story without reservation. In the Bible, we hear stories of Jesus, a prophet mighty in speech and powerful in deeds, who took on this world and turned it completely upside down. We can hear his fierce advocacy for those who are marginalized. We can experience his tender mercy for those who are hurting. We can celebrate the freedom and release he can bring to those who are in bondage.

How does the Bible do this? It does this when we tell the stories in new ways—and when we learn how to listen with new ears. In what follows I share two examples of ways I read old stories—seeking out words that become a song into which others may join.

Listening to the Bible Again: A Talking Snake

I know it sounds strange, but I was talking to a snake recently. I was in a garden, thinking about what I should do with my life, how I should live. I found myself at an important crossroads, at a fork in the road of my life. I had to decide which path to take. We've all known such places, such times. Jesus spoke of such a place when he alluded to the wide and narrow ways that we must choose between. Robert Frost spoke of that

place as two roads diverging in a woods. Should I follow the high-traffic path or try the road less taken? I thought and prayed and thought and prayed.

That's when the talking snake slithered up to me and invited me to follow the well-worn and easy path. I was certainly tempted. Are we not all prone to leave our true selves behind, standing naked at the fork in the road, while we forge on down the wide path that leads to nowhere?

My story echoes a story from the book of Genesis, which is not just about two people who lived a long time ago and talked to a snake one day. To literalize their story—to read it as a bare, historical account, is to lock it in the past. That story is about me. It's about you. It's about every human person. That's the power of the story: we've all talked to that snake.

Listening to the Bible Again: A Dead and Buried Brother

A few years ago, I was in an awful situation, filled with sadness and bound by grief. I was denying who I really was. I was locked in a sealed room, unable to breathe. But, one day, I began to hear the Song. The Song eventually grew louder and sang to me, “Greg, get out of there. You've been there long enough.” And then I heard the Song say to anyone who would listen, “Unbind him, and let him go.” Loving hands unbound me and it was the most amazing song I had ever heard. It is the most amazing song any one can ever hear. And the Song sings on, inviting others still out into freedom. As I was enabled to

live again, to be free again, after being buried in the dark earth, so can others. That is God's song which continues. This is the song I want to sing.

This story, found in John, chapter 11, is not just about a man named Lazarus who lived a long time ago. To literalize their story—to read it as a bare, historical account, is to lock it in the past. That story is about me. It's about you. It's about every person who has ever been trapped or stifled or wasted away. And, read another way, from the perspective of those who grieved his death, it is about every person who has loved and lost, ever suffered and grieved. To treat these stories as if they're simply factual is to leave your brain behind. To pretend that these stories are meaningless because they're not factual is to leave your soul behind. Brain and soul belong together. To see these stories as a space in which to reflect upon life allows brain and soul to remain in concert.

The Old Song Book Belongs to the Body

The Good News I want to boldly share today is that the Church, like its Bible, should be a hospitable place, within which we can reflect upon our lives. With the Bible and its stories as a model, as living songs to sing, the Church can be a place where we practice looking more deeply, seeing more clearly, living more fully. At least, that's what the Church ought to be. And as we enter the hospitable space that is the Church, as we enter the powerful world of the Bible, we can experience friendship with other people who inhabit that space and who are likewise reflecting upon their lives. And as we reflect together, we come to be joined in love. And not only that, we find ourselves linking our

hearts and hands to touch others, to invite them into that reflective space where they, too, can ponder what it means to be alive.

And in the Church and in the Bible, we meet a man named Jesus, whose love is without condition, without boundary. We meet Jesus, whose heart is open and full of mercy. He can help us deal with the talking snakes that tempt us—for he met snakes, too and yet remained on the path he was born to walk. He can help us be free from the things that bind us—for he came to break chains and let the oppressed go free. He can show us how to love and how to forgive and how to refrain from being judgmental and how to see and how to hear and how to serve—for that is how he lived, that is how he lives still.

And as Jesus ate with sinners and did not want the children to be kept away, the Church, the Body he left behind, is called to be a place of welcome. The Church that is true to Jesus welcomes all people into a space where they can reflect upon their lives. Whatever you've done, whoever you are, whatever you think, whatever you believe, whatever you don't believe, the Church welcomes you. If you're divorced, if you're gay, if you're an unwed parent, the Church welcomes you. If you're dealing with addiction, if you're a liar or a cheater or a thief, the Church welcomes you. If you don't believe everything you were taught in childhood, the Church welcomes you. There is a place for you. It's a place of welcome and embrace, a place of hospitality and acceptance, of unconditional positive human regard². It is the Church of Jesus.

² Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (London: Constable, 1961)

But God does not call us into the church to get right with God and go home unchanged. God does not call the addict or the liar or the thief into the church to be a better addict, liar or thief. No, we are called to be transformed by the Spirit, being changed from glory to glory to reflect the divine image, to tune our hearts to God's song. We are called to heal the world. And we have been given tools to help us do this—the sacraments are examples of the gifts that God has bestowed upon the Church to heal and transform us—both individually and collectively.

Font and Table: Places to Learn the Song

Your children are not your children,
They are the sons and the daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you
Kahlil Gibran

Baptism is a rite of initiation into the Christian faith. It is an act in which God's claim upon us, God's promise that nothing can separate us from God's love, is expressed and demonstrated. In the United Church of Christ, we recognize the legitimacy of both infant and adult baptisms by either sprinkling or immersion as well as the authority of baptisms celebrated within other Christian denominations.

My experience of baptism has been profoundly influenced by my ministry as a hospital chaplain. Much of my ministry was with parents whose children were stillborn. The Christian tradition teaches that sacraments are for the living, meaning that the baptism of a child who has died or who never drew a breath is inappropriate. However, the

deathbed of an infant is not the place for doctrinal precision; nor is it a didactic moment. For grieving parents, tradition gives way to a gesture of the church that offers them a measure of comfort, a recognition that this child was loved and known by God and abides now in perpetual light.

In the face of tragedy, as well as on happier days, baptism reminds us that we, that our futures, rest peacefully in God's heart. We are marked as God's own forever.³ Whether being baptized or witnessing the baptism of another, as Christians who live in community, we hear and see once more the astounding truth that nothing can separate us from God or from God's love. Furthermore, each time an infant is handed from parent to pastor in the presence and witness of our faith community, we enact the claim that our children are not our children, but are entrusted to the One who promises life even after death. We are marked as God's forever.

I'm gonna sit at the welcome table
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, hallelujah!
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days!
African-American Spiritual

The hymns we sing actually “do theology” on many levels. What we sing shapes and informs what we believe. Rabbi Hillel informed his followers, “Be careful that you sing what you believe and that you believe what you sing.” The finest example of doing theology through music is the rich and often underestimated tradition of the African-

³ Scott Haldeman, *Washed and Ready: Baptism as Call and Gift of Ministry* from “Called to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching and the Arts” Vol. 40.2, 2006-2007

American Spiritual. The basic claim of the spirituals is that slavery contradicts God, that it is a denial of God's will.

While white religion in America taught slaves to look for their reward in heaven through obedience to their white masters on earth, black slaves were in fact carving out a new style of earthly freedom—exercising their imagination, to conjure hope, a this-worldly hope through a rich and complex system of songs. For black slaves, Jesus is God who breaks into our historical present and transforms it according to divine expectations.⁴

On the surface, the spiritual sometimes appeared to be nothing more than a work song. Overseers were not aware that some spirituals were as covertly subversive as they were overtly religious. “The Welcome Table” is one such song: overtly religious and covertly subversive. Like many spirituals, the meaning lies not necessarily within the melody or even the text, but rather, how it is interpreted, shaped and reshaped by the people of God, the Body of Christ, by being sung in various tempi and style. In its multiplicity and adaptability, this song which truly is the community's song, summarizes my Eucharistic theology. Sung briskly with clapping, this spiritual celebrates a table where all are welcome, where all are equal, where all are one. But sung slowly, perhaps with snapping or keeping time on one's leg, the Spiritual pines for a this-worldly hope which assures the disinherited of the world that, despite the fact that not all are actually welcome at many tables now, the will of God shall not long be denied to all God's people.

⁴ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (NY, Seabury Press, 1972) p. 87

The bread and wine are symbols. They are gifts to us as products of earth and of human labor and human artistry. We bring these gifts out of the bounty we are given and offer them in gratitude. God takes them and yet gives them right back for our nourishment.

We ingest the bread and wine. We ingest, too, all the stories of bread and cup (manna, leaven, Passover, last supper, cup of blessing, cup of wrath, promised banquet). Our memories are provoked but so are our imaginations. These symbols cause us to look both back and forward—to recall divine faithfulness, to realize and confirm divine promises.

Three basic views of the physical elements of the Eucharist include transubstantiation, with an Aristotelian metaphysic; consubstantiation, born from a more mystical theology; and what Zwinglian memorialism has identified as mere symbolism. I am less interested in choosing among them as finding a post-enlightenment (perhaps post-modern) sense of the symbol—a sacramental understanding in which symbols⁵ are not “mere symbols,” but serve as icons in the best sense of the word, i.e., material objects that are not ends in themselves but windows to the divine, a means to see, to reach what is not material—the encounter of this people, of all the stories, of the act of sharing food and eating together with Spirit/God/Christ in an event that has the power to transform.

This is Eucharist. It is at the table where we gather to sing our stories, where we envision and practice again and again the great hope to which we are called. At table, we are nourished with bread and wine for the journey. We are called to the table not because

⁵ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1993) p. 92

we must come but because we may; not because we are worthy but because we are hungry; not because we are ready but because we are thirsty. We are called to the table to remember, to give thanks, to commemorate what God has done in history. We are also called to leave the table to heal the world.

Singing My Song, Leading God's People

“You’re so vain, you probably think this song is about you.”

Carly Simon

“I believe that I have been called by God to be a minister of the Lord Jesus Christ and seek to be ordained by the United Church of Christ to preach and teach the gospel, to administer the sacraments and rites of the Church, and to exercise pastoral care and leadership.” These words, taken from the Ordained Minister’s Code, reflect and summarize my call to ministry. I have been blessed abundantly with opportunity to study with some of the finest theologians, to be mentored by some of the finest pastors, to worship and minister in the finest congregations and institutions. I have exceptional friends and colleagues—brothers and sisters to accompany and shepherd me on this journey to ordained ministry. They have taught me by generous example how to bring Christ to others and how to sing my song.

One of my personal attributes that has served me well thus far on the journey is my sense of professional and personal ethics and boundaries. As pastors, we are called to be many things to many people: counselor, confessor, compassionate presence, and so on. I have served in these roles successfully at those moments when I realized that the divine

is working through me, empowering me to preach the gospel without fear or favor. Speaking the truth in love includes realizing one's limitations, e.g., knowing when pastoral counseling is crossing the line into therapy, knowing when I have reached the limits of my ability to be helpful, knowing the limits of my skill set and training. Boundaries are indeed limits that enable healthy and safe connections in our relationships with those we are called to serve.⁶

As an example, while serving recently as a transitional pastor, many members of the congregation dropped not-so-subtle hints that I should remain as their permanent pastor. Knowing this, I arrived at a Church Council meeting early in my tenure with a piece of carry-on luggage trailing behind me. "It's my office." I said. "I'm not going to unpack my things because we're only going to be together a short time." Setting those professional boundaries produced more effective results than if I had hinted that I had some willingness to violate my covenant and stay. It would have been more convenient for me personally to stay, but, as Carly Simon reminds us all, this isn't about me.

If I believe that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and to extend the ministry of Jesus Christ, then I believe there are times when I need to defer to other people's gifts and skills. Further, our pastoral and professional relationships are based on the parishioner's need—not ours. Again—it's not about me. When the relationship is based on our need for one reason or another, we reverse roles and compromise our relationships, and indeed compromise our ability to participate in the healing of the world and all its creatures.

⁶ From "A Sacred Trust," the boundary training curriculum used by CMA

As an ordained minister, I am called to serve as shepherd in the most joyful situations in the human experience—and in the most painful ones. Pastors follow a high calling rooted in personal responsibility and personal restraint. We do more than exercise skill sets and systems of knowledge. We are ultimately responsible to the person with whom we are ministering.

In all this, I know I have left easier roads and now journey on the path I was meant to walk. In this journey, I am still beckoned on by the Song which brought me out of my cave of death and granted me new life. I seek now to be entrusted with the vocation of ordained ministry by the church—a ministry in which I will continue to serve with all baptized Christians in the one great ministry but now as one who serves the baptized with restraint and compassion, with wisdom and strength, with vision and accountability—with God’s help.

The Great Symphony

All the voices of the ages in transcendent chorus meet,
Worship lifting up the senses, hands that praise, and dancing feet;
Over discord and division music speaks your joy and peace,
Harmony of earth and heaven, song of God that cannot cease!

Shirley Erena Murray

My training as a musician has actually guided my ministry, having had the profound blessing and privilege of being at the conductor’s helm. My journey as pastor these past few years has been one of accompanying and conducting congregations in transition. It has been my privilege and responsibility to create the conditions where healing and

reconciliation can take place and the hard work of reflection, self-assessment can begin. I have found this is done best by singing the songs of this place and by telling the old, old stories in new ways.

The congregations I have served wanted, more than anything else, to attract new members. Their challenge was to be able to articulate their story, to sing their song. How do you grow if you can't tell your story? I've spent the last few years in this role of transitional ministry as a guest conductor, rehearsing the congregation to sing their song and, to tell their story, preparing the choir for a permanent conductor. This has been a time of blessings, wonderful learning, inspiring prayer and heartfelt celebration.

Now it's time for me to find and lead my own choir, to serve a new community. Like the classical recordings of yesteryear that you could buy with one part omitted so that you could practice playing your part with a great ensemble, I feel like my ministry is a great piece of music—a symphony—with my part missing. The practice, the preparation, has been fruitful, but it is now time to join the song of a community in which I can offer my gifts fully as a called pastor. Meanwhile, I continue to tune my heart to the song that God has for me.

Life indeed is like a great symphony. We may flee from the responsibility of playing our own part. We may sit silently while those around us make music together. We may lose perspective by playing so loudly that we drown out everybody else. We may fail to show concern for the plight of others by insisting on playing whatever comes into our head despite what others are doing. But through constant tuning, we learn the true meaning

of responsibility, perspective and concern. Then, as each of us tunes our own heart and voice to God's song and begins to play our own unique part fully and harmoniously in the complex but exalting and magnificent symphony of life, the world can begin to hear the tune of love and can join the dance of peace. By God's grace, may it be so.