

“Make a Joyful Noise”

Psalm 100

Richard C. Allen

October 8, 2017

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Psalm 100 is one of those texts we learned by heart, or were supposed to learn by heart, back in Sunday School. I'm glad I know most of it because I find I need to draw upon it often. Like pulling a hanky out of my front left pocket, I can pull Psalm 100 out of my memory bank whenever I need it. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth....come into God's presence with singing.” It's about music.

Music. This psalm is about music. Among many other purposes, music is one of God's gifts for healing. Music, of course, makes us want to dance. Music can help us fall asleep. Music can deepen relationships. Music is a language for worship. And music contributes to our healing.

When we woke up Monday morning and heard the news from Las Vegas and continued to hear the reports and see the images on the TV screen, I kept turning to music, music that arises from tragedy, music whose purpose is to help us lament, music that meets us where we are and carries us forward. I don't know what we'd do without music. I kept humming the Don McLean song, “The Day the Music Died,” that song that honors the deaths of Buddy Holly and the Big Bopper and Richie Valens. “Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry.” I turned my truck radio dial from NPR to 91.3. This is the station that plays polkas on Saturday mornings and Gospel tunes before lunch, and symphonies in the evening.

As I have prayed this week for the people of Las Vegas, I have put aside all the words and I've moved to the piano bench or I've picked up my old wooden recorder. I have turned to music as my form of prayer. I've imagined that the simple, gentle melodies from my instruments will find their way to Nevada where they'll be an ointment on a wound, a bandage on an ouie, a salve on a sorrow.

The psalm writers understood that music is one of God's best gifts to the world.

"Come into God's presence with singing," says Psalm 100. Every year, there's always at least one Confirmation student who wants to know, 'why do we sing all those hymns?' For me, the answer is quite simple. We come to church hoping that something will touch our souls. Most often, it's the music that reaches the deep places of the soul. Music takes us to the mountain tops where we shout our praises to God! And music takes us to the deepest valleys where we share our darkest laments with God. "Come into God's presence with singing."

It's no coincidence that we have the Hot Cat Jazz Band with us today for Second Sunday music and for 10:30 worship. Though I have never been a student of jazz music, I have this hunch that jazz arises from a place of suffering. I imagine slaves picking cotton and singing jazz melodies as they toil in the hot sun. I imagine mourners on their way to a New Orleans cemetery for a burial humming a jazz tune learned from childhood. I imagine Louis Armstrong wailing away on his trumpet, sounding out the heartache of generations of plantation workers. When I hear the rhythm of a jazz band, I feel things inside of me that I haven't felt for a long time.

I feel some wound is being healed;
some weight is being lifted;
some darkness is being overcome;
some despair is being addressed;
some hunger is being chased away.

I don't know if the psalm writers knew about jazz. I'm sure they didn't! But they knew about tragedy. They knew about times when life isn't fair. They knew about feelings such as abandonment and frustration. They knew about intense joy and they knew about redemption and reconciliation. And they just had this knowing that when we sing, when we make music, we're in the presence of God.

Probably, one of my earliest religious experiences was at a campfire. We had toasted the marshmallows, and we had added some logs onto the fire, when someone began to sing 'Kum Ba Yah.' We sang all the verses. My 13 year old body was alive in a way I didn't know it could be alive. We make fun of 'Kum Ba Yah' now. It's become a symbol, I suppose, for the side of religion that's nostalgic and superficial. But it was the music that awakened me to the truth that I have a soul and that music is what can touch my soul. So I don't apologize for mentioning it in my sermon.

Years ago, we used to conduct a mid-week devotional service at Salmon Brook Convalescent Home. I would tell a story and lead a prayer. Lois Harwick would lead the singing of hymns. And she'd always say to the residents, "If you don't feel like singing, just hum along." Lois understood the mystical power of music. She drew people into it anyway she could.

All this past week, I have held the City of Las Vegas and Psalm 100 in a creative tension. I've held Las Vegas in my right hand and Psalm 100 in my left. The psalmist writes, "God's steadfast love endures forever." Forever is a long time! I found myself comforted by that statement of faith. "God's love endures forever." We kept hearing about the number of people who died of the bullet wounds; I found myself wanting to hear the names of those people. They aren't just numbers.

They are men and women and adolescents. They are human beings created in God's image. They each have a story. They each have a song. They each have loved and have been loved. When I think of each of them, my heart fills up with this ancient truth, this ancient statement of faith, "God's steadfast love endures forever." So, I was grateful relieved Friday night, when the Channel 8 News showed the pictures and the names of all those who died in the Las Vegas shooting. God's love endures forever for each of them.

I forget now which of my Sunday School teachers had us memorize Psalm 100. It may have been Ruth Drake. It may have been Bill Witherspoon. Whoever it was knew they were giving me a treasure.

Whether I'm on the mountain top with an A in French II or whether I am in the darkest valley with a failure to communicate, I have this knowing that God is good, that I am a sheep in God's pasture, and that music, in one form or another, has the power to ignite a flame to give rise to a new day. It is in this knowing that I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.