

St. John's, Albany
4 September 2016

16 Pentecost – C

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Philemon 1-21

Psalm 1

Luke 14:25-33

#808 “Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song”

The text for the sermon comes from our first reading: *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²‘Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.’ ³So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. ⁴The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.*

The relationship of a potter to her clay is a much different one than the relationship between a chess master and his chess pieces. Let me say that again: The relationship of a potter to her clay is a much different one than the relationship between a chess master and his chess pieces. So hold that thought.

Because the text for the sermon also comes from our hymn of the day. Now, I think it’s probably a new one for you. It was for me. It’s not a really great tune, but it’s pretty easy to pick up. And these are the words to the first verse:

*Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey;
I’ll tell everybody about you wherever I go:
You alone are our life and our peace and our love.
Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.*

I know--not very poetic words, right? They’re just an honest, but frankly, artless statement about following Jesus wherever you go in life. So, you may be thinking that, with such plain words and a not especially lovely melody, why did I pick this as the hymn of the day? Good question.

The truth is, when I was a young girl, and then even later, as I was discerning a call into the ministry, I used to spend a lot of time mulling over the words of hymns. Probably not until I went to seminary did the Bible influence my theology and understanding of God as much as music and hymnody did. (And, of course, a great many hymns are based on Bible passages, so I was still being directed by the thoughts behind if not by direct quotes from scripture.)

But I don’t think I’m alone in having had my theology and views of God shaped by church music. In general, music compels us; it stirs our hearts and both feeds, troubles and soothes our souls. When St. Paul said, “Faith comes from what is

heard” he may as well have been talking as much about music as about a preacher’s words.

But with hymn-singing you add to music the very thing that is foundational to our living—our breath. We can only sing because we are alive. And we are only alive because we can breathe! Singing, then, is about as basic as breathing—even if we’re shy about our voices, even if we don’t sing very well. We sing because we breathe. And because we have words with which to sing. And, of course, the language of hymnody is sometimes so lovely, so beautiful that we become swept along in its imagery. Remember from just last week these gorgeous words from our recessional hymn, “Lead on, O King eternal, till sin’s fierce war shall cease/and holiness shall whisper the sweet amen of peace.”

Back when I was a confirmand, contemplating coming of age in the church, I remember singing “Take My Life, That I May Be” and pondering the words, “Take my will and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine.” And I remember the lines “Take my intellect and use every power as thou shalt choose.” They troubled me, those two verses. Because I was strong-willed. I had desires, things I wanted to do. And I didn’t like the idea of God taking over my intellect. I was a smart student, an independent thinker. I didn’t want to become God’s little robot. Was I *supposed* to want that?

Around the same time in my life, I also used to muse on the lines from “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded”:

*What language shall I borrow, to thank thee dearest friend,
for these thy dying sorrow, thy pity without end?
Oh, make me thine forever and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never, outlive my love to thee.*

And with those words I realized that Jesus’ death was not meant to make me die to my own identity, my own will, my own intellect. It was so that I might rise even more surely and confidently into that person God crafted me to be.

When my new-born daughter, Linnea was an extreme preemie in the Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit, I had to gown up and then scrub for three minutes. During that odd and weird cleansing period before I would be allowed to touch my daughter, I silently prayed the Lord’s prayer and I sang (in my head) “Christ, Whose Glory Fills the Skies.” This is verse three:

*Visit then this soul of mine, pierce the gloom of sin and grief;
Fill me, radiancy divine, scatter all my unbelief;
More and more thyself display, shining to the perfect day.*

After all, why wouldn’t I have felt grief and unbelief in those awful, long and uncertain days? What else could I do but pray? And sing? Even silently? The words of the hymn were the life line connecting me equally to both my fear and my hope.

Don't hymns work that way for you, too? Because I mean, we've all come to love the song, "There In God's Garden" in the last couple of years. Am I the only person in this room who wants that sung at her funeral? And "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light"—which Dan has picked as the recessional hymn for today--is the hymn I picked for us to sing at my own mother's funeral. Why? Because the lyrics "When we have run with patience the race, we shall know the joy of Jesus" was a comfort to me, then, and expressed my hope that we will find fulfillment in God. And I picked the song even I knew that neither my mother nor I ever did or do *anything* patiently.

The last two church calls that I've left, we sang "You Have Come Down to the Lakeshore" on my last Sunday. I'm guessing we'll sing it on my last Sunday with you, too. Because honestly, listen to these words:

*Lord, you have looked into my eyes;
kindly smiling, you called out my name.
On the sand I have abandoned my small boat;
Now with you, I will see other seas.*

I ask you, is there any more fitting way to describe the life of faith? *Now with you, I will seek other seas.* The life of service in Christ's name is not a settled life; it is an itinerant life. It is not about buildings. Or stability. Or tradition. Or sameness.

It's about this:

*Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey;
I'll tell everybody about you wherever I go:
You alone are our life and our peace and our love.
Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.*

Those are not artful words. They're simple words. The tune is—well, Dan will make it sound better than it probably is. But the words direct us to what our live of faith is really, really all about: "Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey."

This life—and this life of faith—is a journey. And we must always, always be prepared to give up that which no longer serves us in our service to God.

And so, we come back to the passage from Jeremiah and my comment at the beginning of this sermon about the difference between the potter and the chess master.

The chess master moves the pieces. The pieces don't respond. They just get moved from one square to another. Perhaps they are elegantly carved ivory or smoothly-sanded wood. But ultimately, the chess pieces are inanimate and the chess master doesn't know them, doesn't feel them, doesn't engage with them beyond the strategy they can advance against his opponent.

With the potter, though, it's different. The clay beneath the potter's hands is malleable. It's responsive. It's of the earth and it's not hardened. The clay can be shaped because the potter loves to feel it and loves to shape it. The potter loves the clay. For the potter, there is no strategy aimed at winning. There is no opponent. For the potter there is only the ongoing discovery of the potential within the clay.

Let me state the obvious, which I sometimes think we forget:

God is a potter, not a chess master. We are clay, not inanimate pieces. In other words, God is forming us and re-forming us. We are in the hands of a loving crafter. We do not need to be afraid. But more importantly, we do not need to resist. We are called forth to look at our lives and discern what meaning we can find, through scripture, through song, through our lives shared together.

We are cresting on some mighty big decisions and our identity as the congregation of St. John's is changing. But all that means is that God's hand is upon us, shaping us into the new living, breathing, singing version of the body of Christ in this time.

And so, our hymn of the day is a travelling song and a travelling mercy for our journey in faith:

*Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey;
I'll tell everybody about you wherever I go:
You alone are our life and our peace and our love.
Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey
I fear in the dark and the doubt of my journey;
But courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side.
And with all the family you saved by your love,
We'll sing to your dawn at the end of our journey.*

And the peace of Christ will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.