

A Sermon for Lent by Glen Yakushiji

March 12, 2017



Second Sunday of Lent

I think Celebration Circle has created a very rich and evocative liturgy for this Lent season. I heard it for the first time as we all read it last week and was impressed by how solid and grounded it felt. I felt it spoke to me very clearly and directly. This is the first time I've done a real sermon at Seekers. I haven't felt an urge to preach because I thought my contribution to worship came through the music we sang or heard. I'm thankful to all who have stepped up to provide music so I can think about standing here, in this new role.

I find the Lent tradition of looking inward to be very helpful. I didn't have this practice when I was growing up and I'm glad we uphold it in Seekers. Today I'm going to share

about my thoughts from the scriptures and lectionary, and I'm going to talk about some ideas about music. I hope something I say will be helpful.

I was raised in a Southern Baptist church in Los Angeles, California. It was full of nice, mostly Japanese-Americans, who dressed conservatively, and worshiped fundamentally. I learned about Jesus, the bible heroes, the saving power of Jesus blood, his sacrifice on Calvary, what I owed for forgiveness of sins.

I memorized scripture, did Vacation Bible School, worried about missionaries in China, Japan, or Africa, take your pick. It was: bringing-in-the-sheaves. old-rugged-cross. born-again. Convicted-of-the-spirit, and I just want to praise you Lord... a bunch of things I now think of as: Baptist Technology. The church suffered through a slow decline and eventually closed its doors. I believe that church was crushed under the weight of the Great Commission. The commandment that put the responsibility of saving everybody on earth on our little church; an impossible task. By the end of my time that church felt grim, full of guilt and judgment; it was scared, desperate, and powerless. I left because I needed a more positive outlook for my life; I felt harried and exhausted, and wondered how anyone could find joy, peace, or any fun in any church.

I did some other stuff, then married Deborah; we moved to DC and we found Seekers. Here was a place for me to rest and reconsider what I needed to do for myself. After a few weeks of hanging around I started to learn about Seekers Technology: shared leadership, call, authority at the point of gift, mission groups, the open pulpit, accountability, spiritual direction, disciplines, re-commitment, silverware, consensus, sharing, and dare I say it: fun?

We have been here for a couple of decades and in Seekers I have found peace, joy, and been able to renew my faith in

Christianity. I know the creativity and wisdom of this Seekers Technology (being fully aware of Gordon, and earlier CofS generations) has helped me find deep connections with other Christians, and a better understanding of what a Christian life can be.

As I read the lectionary scriptures for this week I found that I could imagine God reciting my life story back to me. God said Go. Leave your Baptist Los Angeles (country), and go to DC (land that I will show you); and God seemed to write to me: have faith, look above for support, be born again, and, John 3:16. God left me at ground-zero of Baptist Tech. So what was God prompting me to say?

After a bit of thought I figured out that God was showing me that the Baptist church wasn't the terrible, horrible, boring place I had been complaining about. With more thinking, I now know that my small church had been doing the best they knew, and that I didn't have enough knowledge or skill to deal with my own feelings about faith, or the ability to see their efforts for what they really were. They were trying to share their deep faith in God.

I recently heard of a person who keeps an imaginary trashcan next to her chair. When she hears advise that does not make sense for her she tosses it in. She keeps the useful ideas to improve into her life now. She said that she doesn't empty the can because something that isn't right for her today might be needed later on. So I've gotten an imaginary trashcan of my own and am tossing out all the Baptist Technology that I can't use but, surprisingly, finding a lot that is worth keeping.

I can see that I have valuable gifts from that time of my life: a bedrock faith in a loving God, a reasonably good knowledge of the bible, how to do biblical exegesis, and I learned how to play a guitar and started singing with others—I played guitar for the youth group for years and years.

In the process of writing the last paragraph I've realized

something important.

I am in Deborah's Forgiveness class in the School of Christian Living. We have been looking at the issues that surround an injury or insult, and learning about how to begin the process of forgiveness. Because of the writing of this sermon I realize that I need to consider offering forgiveness to the Baptist church for being the Baptist church I grew up in. I have been holding a grudge that I really should think about seriously. I'll do that next week, after I finish giving this sermon.

In the story of the Pharisee Nicodemus, Jesus talks about the wind. He says the wind blows where it chooses, and we can't see it, or know where it goes, and this, for me, is a beautiful metaphor for music and the life of the spirit.

More than once I've had the vision of divine music flowing all around me. I can imagine that it also flows through me; and that beautiful heavenly noise is filling the universe that I can't quite hear with my ears, but I think if I'm paying attention I can feel the edges of it in the soles of my feet, or through my beating heart.

I imagine that God's spirit is with me and the spirit is filled with that music. Filling me and joining the world with music when I breathe out; simple and basic, and wondrously profound at the same time. Moving where it chooses.

It makes sense to me that my soul has come into this earthly plane from God's realm and will go back there someday. I don't know where my spirit will go after it leaves me but I'm confident it will be part of God's creation still and things will be as they should.

In music the silences between sounds are not empty. The silences are called rests, or I've heard it called ghosting and in this sermon I could say "holy-ghosting," but a rest is

not passive. It's supposed to be full of energy—just not audible energy. I know when I'm praying well my silence is full of energy, full of spirit, full of intention, towards God.

I find a lot of comfort in these images because the spirit feels like a flow of life, motion, a part of God that moves into this world, into my life, and back again to heaven. I feel that I'm bound to God through the spirit, wind, and music.

On Friday night Patricia of Minas, the Brazilian-jazz duo, from the stage spoke about her vision of an old European style empty room. She saw an old man come in and begin playing. She became aware of what a musician brings into a space: history, his own life, and musical tradition. She went on to say that listeners create their own relationship with the music, and through the music to each other.

When I heard that I thought: that is exactly what I talk about when I introduce the Taizé services in circle time. When someone is singing, music instantly fills the space around everyone and thing in range of the sound. It is a field full of energy that living entities can interact with. That is an image of God on earth. Music creates a connection between all of us together.

As I thought about the nature of spirit and wind flowing, moving like invisible water, or breath, into and out of our collective and personal spaces I thought of a song that I love. It's called "The Never Ending Happening" by Bill Fay. Do you know it? I'll tell you about it.

In it I hear a sense of awe, it's full of images of movement and change, things that seem random but in this song I'm able to imagine the Holy Spirit moving in and through the world. Notice the quality of silence between the sound, and the way the singer's voice blends out to the silence, then gently

feathers back onto center stage. He sounds old and he sounds tired but I can also hear quiet faith and hope. His voice shakes in places, and I find that is somehow reassuring.

I hope you hear a bit of what I have described. It's okay if you don't; I have listened to this song many times and it took a little while for me to understand what I just told you. I'm going to read the lyrics so you will have heard them once. <http://www.songlyrics.com/bill-fay/the-never-ending-happening-lyrics/> .

I started with a bit of my story, and was surprised to see how God spoke to me during the writing of this sermon. I know that my thinking is not always trustworthy. I thought I knew what happened to me but find I never took a clear-eyed look back. God works in real time and is constantly pointing me in the right direction and I can get a lot if I pay attention.

My idea about technology is a bit of a joke, even so it is helpful to me, and truth be told, I am a fan of Appropriate Technology, that is, finding the proper tool for the job. I think that means using all the good gifts of God however they came to me. I've got to use both the old and the new ideas and methods to make sense of the mess around us.

I think we Seekers find ways to see the old, old story with open eyes, open hearts and open minds. We have an awesome tool kit full of hope and wisdom. I am going to endeavor not to be afraid and look up to the heights for strength; and I hope we can distill some high-quality silence out of the ordinary stuff around us, then let's pray more deeply; and let's create more community. I think that could be fun.

Amen