

Dan Phillips: Song Sermon

Sermon presented at Seekers worship

14 September 2003

by Dan Phillips

Song Sermon

We at Seekers are at a time of decision-making with regard to music. Our Seekers' experience with music has been as ambiguous as everything else we do: we have enjoyed great music, and yet not made music as much a part of our worship as it is in other churches; we have embraced silence at the expense of music. From the objective measure of the number of minutes that we spend singing versus the number of minutes that we spend in worship not singing, music is less important in Seekers than it has been in any other church I have ever been in. Moreover, we have tried and failed to establish a mission group around music.

Now before you protest, I am not saying that is wrong. I am just not saying its right. I am saying we should again consider how we embrace or reject music as a community. As we move to Carroll Street and examine the other aspects of our worship, we are asking how we want to use music to support the worship experience.

We have this challenge now because the small, dedicated group that was supporting this effort has dwindled. The remaining members of this group, Glen and Liz, asked Celebration Circle to raise once more this issue for the community.

We are posing the following questions: What does music mean to us? How should we 'do' music in the worship? Who is interested in being a part of a group to select the worship music for each service? Who is interested in presenting special music as

part of our worship? What will the move to Carroll Street mean for our worship music? What other musical events, such as the **singalongs**, are we willing to support as a community?

The first thing I can remember about churches is my favorite song. The song was **When The Roll is Called Up Yonder**. "When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound, and time shall be no more": not a bad song for someone who grew up to like science fiction! That is what this sermon is about: music and its part in my life. If you will, this is the musical version of Dan's journey.

Of course, it started in church. The memory I have of that first song is tied to a location that meant I could not have been 4 years' old. By the way, that is all I remember of worship in that place: the music.

Music was always a part of worship. The Baptist tradition was "sing until you're out of breath, then listen to the preacher." We sang old hymns, like **Rock of Ages** and **A Mighty Fortress is our God**. We sang loud hymns like **Onward Christian Soldiers** and softer hymns like **The Old Rugged Cross**. We sang sweet sounding hymns like **Heavenly Sunlight** and horrible sounding hymns like **There is a Fountain Filled with Blood**. It was the part of the service that I enjoyed the most.

For us young folk we had choruses: music "lite". We sang **This Little Light of Mine**, that sort of thing. All this music was designed to get our participation in something that could reinforce the theological message.

Of course, there was the occasional gospel song. **Swing Low, Sweet Chariot** was known by all, but not sung in church. I remember my dad singing **I'll Fly Away** in the car, but never in church. I was a teenager before I realized the powerful, but unspoken, prejudice against "black music."

Some music I heard was not Christian. Not much, but some. I can remember my dad singing **He's in the Jailhouse Now**. I

remember being intrigued that my father knew a song that was *not* Christian. Nevertheless, such episodes were rare.

Naturally, all this changed in the sixties, my teen years. When I was ready for popular music, it was ready for me. There was The Beatles, of course. Then shortly after, there was Simon and Garfunkel. For me, popular music was rebellion. Not only was it not Christian, it usually challenged the Christianity I had been raised in. Just listening to it in my parents' home was a challenge to them; they often responded to as only parents can.

For me, the main point of my disagreement with my parents was over race relations, not the war in Vietnam. Therefore, war protest songs were slower to reach my consciousness. I can remember the first time I ever heard the Simon-and-Garfunkel rendition of **The Strangest Dream**. I did eventually learn, however, the **Draft Dodger Rag**, a song I never saw in writing until I saw a copy of *Rise Up Singing*.

The next major musical event for me occurred while I was in the Army (apparently, I did not sing the **Draft Dodger Rag** well or often enough!). Anyway, while in Europe, I heard some music from something called "Jesus Christ Superstar." I was blown away! To think that someone could address something that had been so much a part of my life with such wonderful music and such daring lyrics! I am still in awe to this day.

I do not remember any musical events for some time after that. Martha and I often attended Musical dramas. I am fond of Cabaret, so we went to see it every time we could. I enjoyed Don Quixote, though I never saw a good production. **To Dream The Impossible Dream** is such a wonderful idea, and song.

While I did attend a Baptist church and sing in the choir for years, the next music that touched me came from my children. My oldest son Dan liked, still likes, Rap music, and often listened to MC Hammer. I remember a song he listened to called

You Have to Pray Just to Make It Today. I thought of how appropriate it was, for those were troubled and hard years. Another sign of those times was the song I most often associate with my younger son, Jon: **I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.** Moreover, indeed, it was during those hard years of the mid-to-late eighties that I realized that spiritually I had not found what I was looking for.

The last 10 years or so has been a time of finding good music where I least expected it. I discovered somewhere along the line that I liked gospel music, something I never cared a lot about when I was younger. However, it has not been the kind of music that is a surprise. I have been gifted with several different styles of music during this decade of serendipity.

While Martha was pastoring, there were times that special music was required. Some of the men wanted to sing, so for a short period, I was part of a quartet. We sang only well-known hymns. It was fun, and easy. Then Martha wanted to conduct a Tennebrae service. Because it was not a tradition in the church, we knew not many would attend, and there was no money for the professional musicians we hired for Sundays. Therefore, we recorded various hymns and gospel songs and put together our own musical interludes for this service. The three years that Martha did this resulted in three very moving services.

Another of the sources of musical treasure has been the movies. From the movie Shrek, unbelievably, I gained the song **Hallelujah**, which we heard a version of when Sandra spoke in mid-August. From the movie O Brother Where Art Thou, I gained a new appreciation for **I'll Fly Away, You are My Sunshine** (which I also remember my father singing) and **Angel Band.**

From my son Jon I inherited an album called Evangeline. The album contained a version of **By the Rivers of Babylon**, an old black spiritual that I never heard before.

Nevertheless, the best source of new music for me has been Seekers. Like it has for my spiritual life, Seekers has revived and molded my musical life. The variety of music used for the Processional and for the Offering has been a blessing to me. One example of this was the song (**Paved Paradise**) that we used here not too long ago.

The best part of this has been hearing music not generally associated with church played in a worship context. Not only have I opened up the religious music filters in my mind, I have also seen how religion and life are not two different places. They are one shared place, one place that deserves one set of music, not 2. This is not an argument against diversity, just an argument against building walls around differing traditions, musical or otherwise.

Then there have been the singalongs, arranged and coordinated by our resident musical savant Glen. Along with the songbook *Rise up Singing*, they have educated me on a broader class of semi-religious, socially conscious music available to those on the spiritual path.

In addition to these rich sources, I must mention three specific songs given me by members of my mission groups. I remember the night Jeanne Marcus played for us the song **How Can I Keep from Singing**. It was here, in this room, because that is where Jeanne could find a place to play the song. Margreta Silverstone brought the second song to a L&T Christmas party. The song was our processional this morning: **I See His Blood Upon the Rose**. Moreover, having been directed to Leonard Cohen by Sandra, the song **Heart With No Companion** (which will be our offertory) has been in mind since I heard it about 2 weeks ago.

So what does this all mean to me, and to us? Yes, it has been fun to remember all these songs, and we all remember music more than other things. But so what?

For me, the discovery of the unity between the profane and the sacred has been quite powerful. I am still working with that, trying to see what it would mean in other areas of my life, such as work. While an awareness of the power of music in my life has been slow in coming, it has arrived now.

I love the ambiguity of music that is spiritual, maybe. Songs like **How Can I Keep from Singing**, **Heart With No Companion** and **I See His Blood Upon the Rose** have an ambiguity that allows us to take what we need from them, but not be forced into a doctrinal mold by them.

To return to the questions with which I began: what will we do with music now? I am sure that Seekers will not find one answer to this question: we will find several. That is good. The discussions to follow will be rewarding, because we know the journey is just as important as the destination. For myself, as I listen to the holy choir that we call Seekers, I say, "How can I keep from singing?"