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## “Singing the Mighty Power of God”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)  
July 29, 2015

Psalm 137:1–6; Colossians 3:15–17; Revelation 5:7–14

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For our wedding service, which was a long time ago,

I worked very hard to pull together music

which evoked some meaning for our families

and which reflected something of our identities.

We did not sing hymns at our wedding, but we played hymns.

And the hymn we chose to play when our grandparents and parents

were ushered down the aisle and seated

was a Moravian hymn loved by both my grandmother and my mother:

*Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice*

*I'm his sheep and know his voice;*

*He's a shepherd, kind and gracious,*

*and his pastures are delicious;*

*Constant love to me he shows;*

*Yea my very name he knows.*

I still tear up when I picture the two most important women in my life

being escorted in to that hymn.

Some months after our wedding, a friend of my husband's commented on the service,  
saying that she especially liked our selection of music.

And she asked me to share "the mother song" with her, as she called it,  
because she wanted to use it at her upcoming ceremony.

I should have been flattered that she liked our wedding music,  
but I found myself choking with conflicting emotions.

As a newly married woman, I didn't think I was quite ready  
to share this with a friend of my husband's.

And I tried not to project that my heart was not exactly "rejoicing" at her request.

What I refrained from voicing to her was this:

That hymn means nothing to you; why would you want to use it?

We've sung that hymn our whole lives, and you're not even Moravian!

No, that's our hymn... you can't use it!

Those were the words I was trying to swallow.

And my momentary hesitation probably spoke louder than those words.

But what I should have said to the friend who asked about "the mother song" was:

Yes, this hymn has meant so much to our family. Of course you can use it,  
and I'll send you the lyrics so that you can see  
what a beautiful faith statement it makes.

We should share with one another the psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs that have  
taught and admonished us throughout our lives to build up, encourage,  
and strengthen the body of Christ.

After all, what are hymns for? Who owns them?

Do they belong to a particular tradition or are they part of the public domain?

Are oldie goldies from one tradition new expressions of faith to another?

Who can ever forget President Obama breaking into song at the funeral  
service of Rev. Clementa Pinckney last month at Emanuel AME in Charleston,  
with his soulful rendering of "Amazing Grace."

I got the impression that it was not planned,

but rather that the song emerged spontaneously from some place deep within,

a primal symbol of his heartfelt religious identity,  
sung as a gospel hymn that brought him in solidarity  
with those hurting the most at this time.

We all were hurting, and that hymn sung in that way by that man,  
our President, was boundary-breaking healing balm to comfort those in grief,  
all those in grief, whether it be the direct victims of loss  
or those of us feeling the sting of white guilt.

No one can deny the power of a hymn at that moment to speak God's healing truth  
to our human pain.

North Carolina's Bishop Michael Curry, the newly elected presiding bishop  
of the Episcopal Church, recently published a book entitled,  
*The Songs My Grandma Sang.*

Curry's grandparents were grandchildren of former slaves in Alabama  
and North Carolina.

"They gleaned stories and sayings whose wisdom had been tried in the fire  
of this hard life," Curry says.

"Their songs and sayings reflected a deep faith and profound wisdom  
that taught them how to shout 'glory' while cooking in  
'sorrow's kitchen,' as they used to say.

In this there was hidden treasure that saw many of them through,  
and that is now a spiritual inheritance... a sung faith  
expressing a way of being in relationship with the living God  
of Jesus that was real, energizing, sustaining, loving, liberating,  
and life-giving." (Curry, *Songs My Grandma Sang*, p. 3)

Curry also talks about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian  
who came to the United States in 1930 to study at Union Seminary  
in New York, where he was introduced to the worship and  
music of The Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem,

an expression of Christianity unfamiliar to him.

Although Bonhoeffer never wrote about those Sunday morning experiences

at Abyssinian Baptist, experiencing those powerful spirituals

and hearing Dr. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., preach,

we know that it shaped and strengthened his faith for his

return to Nazi Germany to oppose the tyranny of Adolf Hitler.

Curry says, "[Bonhoeffer] heard singing of spirituals,

the sorrow songs and the glory songs,

created in Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace of chattel slavery...

[and] he beheld the vision of a kingdom not made or controlled by this world

or any of its purported powers...

[He heard] songs that sang of a way of viewing the world

that could make life livable no matter what."

(Curry, Michael. *Songs My Grandmother Sang*, pp 5-7)

At the writing conference I attended last week at Kenyon College, I heard this poem

by an anonymous author, called " Mommy's Song."

*When I was young I heard a song.*

*One song I heard, no others.*

*I learned the words and sang along;*

*the song it was my mother's.*

*She never told me how to sing.*

*She never told me why.*

*She simply sang the song she'd heard*

*when she was young as I.*

*Some lines are repeated.*

*And some of them were wise.*

*They were Mommy's bible*

*They were Mommy's blueprint*

*They were Mommy's comfort.*

*But some of them were lies.  
I often write my own songs now.  
But more than now and then  
I find a voice inside me  
Singing mommy's songs again.*

I don't remember the words the hymns my grandmother sang  
because she didn't actually sing them.

She was a hummer.

She hummed them as she snapped green beans  
or cut corn off the cob.

But I recognized the tunes and was curious enough about them  
to look them up and see what they were about.

The last verse of "Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice" is stunning,  
and I can see why she hummed it under her breath until the end of her life.

*Should not I for gladness leap,  
Led by Jesus as His sheep?  
For when these blest days are over,  
To the arms of my dear Savior  
I shall be conveyed to rest:  
Amen, yea, my lot is blest.*

May our lot be blest this day as we sing together these hymns  
that have molded, strengthened, encouraged, comforted,  
questioned, and focused our faith  
for the opportunities and challenges of this day. Amen.