

Janice Rowe

6/30/ FBC Sharing Community Matthew 5:14-15

**You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.**

For me this scene describes a light that beckons me to become part of a community. I believe that God hard-wired us to be in relationships, to belong somewhere. It is the core of being human. Babies need a human touch to survive. We can do more with others than we can do by ourselves. Everyone belongs to a human community and we are responsible for each other. But if the light is hidden, so is the community and we can't find it.

In my life God has drawn me to different communities during life transitions. I grew up as an adopted twin, the quiet one and a bit of a loner. My parents took me to church and it became my community through Sunday school, youth groups, retreats and choir. I continued my church life when I attended a Christian college where I joined a religious sorority choir and mingled with pre-seminary students, one of whom I married. When we moved to Illinois so he could complete seminary and I took a job as a high school teacher, we attended a local church together. Then we returned to Michigan in the late 60's, to start his first church assignment after our first child was born.

Up to that point, I had never questioned that church would be my primary community, until I was faced with divorce. It forced me to make some intentional decisions about belonging to a church. Yet, I never considered finding another community outside the church. I knew I desperately needed a caring community to support me through the traumatic transition to life as a single parent. Church was the only place I knew to find that.

God led me to a local American Baptist church because I knew the organist there. They embraced me as a family, especially during the birth of my second child. I formed friendships and joined in church events. Their commitment to community after my surgery was beyond any expectation as they formed a team of women to bring food and take me to physical therapy three times a week for six weeks. I had never felt so "taken care of".

Eventually that community changed its focus; no longer meeting my spiritual needs, even through my friendships compelled me to stay. After a time of spiritual discernment and feeling pulled in two directions, I went looking for a new church home. The first one I tried was First Baptist and I knew God had led me here; a place where I could become connected to people who shared my spiritual beliefs and values. I felt like I belonged here.

Without those church connections in my life, I'm not sure where I would belong; certainly not in a safe and nourishing place where I could grow on my spiritual journey. I believe we are all looking for that safe and welcoming place where we can belong, especially in a world that builds walls, fears diversity and shuns immigrants. Who isn't looking for a place where all are welcome, where people come together in a community that holds each other up and invites others to join in? This is God's commandment that we love one another, and it is what I found at FBC.

A city, set on a hill, cannot be hidden. It gives light to everyone in its house. And I am confident that our light will shine, like it did for me, on those who do not know they can belong to the family of God.

Leslie Jaquez

#### **Matthew 6:5-6**

**And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.**

I pray.

I pray a lot.

I say a prayer of thanks before my feet hit the floor in the morning.

I thank God to be alive.

I thank the Lord for the fresh clean water in my morning shower. So many millions of people do not have such a guaranteed luxury. So many must labor to have clean water in their lives. So many people walk miles to have access to clean water. So many people must accept less and drink and bathe in water that is not clean nor healthy. In my morning shower, I turn a knob and have all the clean and healthy water that I want. For that I am grateful.

Every time I see car broken down on the side of the road, I pray for that person. I pray that God is with that person as he faces an unexpected trial. I pray that person has the resources to pay for the car repairs so that he can get back to the dignity of work, get back to the sanctuary of home.

I pray for forgiveness. I drive past the same icon each day, and I say the Lord's Prayer as I drive by. I ask for forgiveness for something I did years ago for which I am ashamed. Every single day, twice a day, I ask for His forgiveness by reciting the gift that is The Lord's Prayer.

I pray for friends who do not know the steadfast love of God. I pray they find a way to bring God, to bring Jesus' message of everlasting life into their hearts.

I pray that the wars will stop. That no child is ever hungry.

I pray for the end of disease and the expansion of health throughout the globe.

I pray for the thief. For I understand the fear and desperation one must feel to commit such a sin.

I pray to God to help me become a better person, more tolerant, kinder, more generous.

I pray for the wealthy man who measures his worth in luxuries and dollar signs. I pray the Lord can reach his heart and help him understand that the real gifts in this world are faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love.

I pray for justice to win the day.

I pray for these things because when I reach out to God, he is with me. Prayer calms me. When I hold up a prayer I am asking God to see me, and I know that he does. I pray to meditate, to go within myself, to reach a deeper place of reverence.

I pray so the world might become a better place.

Kathy Charbeneau

How Can I Keep from Singing?

**Psalm 104:33**

**“I will sing unto the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.”**

Last Sunday Pastor’s sermon was upon Music and its generational impact as well as its ability to bring us forward into the new space of here and now.

Everything is interconnected. Pastor has probably seen me looking in my hymnal as he speaks – one phrase causing me to think of another and another, related to each other, and what hymn or line or verse. I eventually circle back to the sermon and turn my attention to Pastor’s message again. It all hinges together, one thing on another, lending depth and meaning beyond just the spoken word.

As far as personal musical experience goes: piano, dance, bell choir, live music, choral music, church choir, concerts, the radio, vinyl, it’s everywhere, all the time. Toni Morrison’s concept of “rememory” – is when a culture sustains a collective memory that transcends generations, allowing the current generation viable access to and purchase on the experiences of previous generations.

It’s much easier for me to identify Bible verses that are incorporated in hymns than to find verses about music. Some of the most beautiful music I have ever experienced is from Biblical text: “How Lovely is Thy Dwelling Place” from Psalm 84, and also the most memorable – summer camp Cherith in Oscoda, 1976, “Beloved, Let Us Love One Another,” from 1 John 4:7 and 8. Music and singing are everywhere and ever present.

As a child I would sit next to my dad in the pew over there. He had been told in kindergarten that he could not sing, and yet, I can remember him singing. I can hear him singing even now. I think it was because we were in church and hymn singing is a collective and important part of worship, whether he could “sing” or not. In fact, he actually could sing, albeit quietly, but he concentrated on the piano – achieving pieces like Gershwin’s “Concerto in F,” among others.

Music was always in the house – Glen Miller, Benny Goodman, Prokofiev, Gershwin, Copeland, the Lettermen – playing records and listening to music was an integral part of life. At church, mom sang in the choir, and when I was 16 I joined too. I had already joined bell choir when I was 10 or so – what a group! I made life-long friends and have maintained this as my passion. The snow cone booth at the Birmingham fair each summer for fundraising – so sticky! So fun! This helped us go to area handbell festivals – there is something about playing music with what seemed like a thousand other people that sets the soul on fire.

Now, some forty plus years later, bells “sustain” me ☺, although I have begun to question why I picked an instrument that weighs so much!

I began to play the piano when I was about eight or so – I had to wait until I could reach the keys and the pedals, and I did well enough. When First Baptist of Birmingham was exploring the idea of acquiring a grand piano, one summer Sunday they wheeled out one of the studio pianos, and I played a little Rachmaninoff for the offering, I was probably 15 or so. The decision was then made – FBCB needed a bigger piano! So the fundraising campaign began: Robert Washburn created the stunning graphic and my mom, Betty Streten, came up with the idea of selling the felt hammers as key chains. I remember helping my dad drill a hole in each one of hundreds to put the chain through.

Music grounds us, connects us, it sustains us in that the song in my head is scripture set to music and that offers solace, a space for contemplation, and a place for joy. That transcendence from scripture to hymn and even to popular song reflects the endurance and pervasiveness of the text.

For example, “How Can I Keep from Singing” was adapted by Pete Seeger and met with a vast listening audience that could appreciate it and appropriate it as relevant for all time. I saw Pete Seeger and Arlo Guthrie in concert in the early ‘80s, and I will never forget the audience at the Fox Theater singing along in one, great voice.

“My life flows on in endless song / Above Earth’s lamentation / I hear the real, though far off hymn / That hails the new creation. / Above the tumult and the strife / I hear the music ringing / It sounds an echo in my soul, / How can I keep from singing?”

Another hymn that has left a lasting impression is *Divinum Mysterium*, mostly as it has been interpreted for handbells and played with precision by *Bellissima!* directed by Hazel Lawrence and Judy Phillips. And, from sitting in the choir loft and looking at the south stained-glass window, there it is again – the Alpha and Omega.

“Of the father’s love begotten / Ere the worlds began to be / He is Alpha and Omega / He the source the ending He. / Of the things that are that have been / and that future years shall see / Ever more and ever more!”

Music provides us with the opportunity to have a deep and passionate connection to God, each other, and ourselves. It re-creates us, grounds us, and lets us soar.