

“MUSIC IN THE HOUSE” ©

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Bloor Street United Church

Sunday, November 22, 2009 – Last Sunday after Pentecost – Reign of Christ

Readings:

Luke 15: 11-32

Then Jesus said, ‘There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.” So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.’ ” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his slaves, “Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” And they began to celebrate.

‘Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, “Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.” Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he

answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" Then the father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found." '

"As he came and drew near the house, he heard music, and dancing." (Lk15:25)

I

There is music in the Father's house, Jesus tells us in his story. The trouble is, the boys have lost the tune – one in a country far from home, the other in a field of night meetings and furrowed brows.

Notice it's the boys who are lost, not the tune. The tune plays on regardless inside the house. The music of right relationship restored, resolution of what is incomplete, harmony intended all along. Music, the story says, never entirely forgotten in the farthest country of despair or totally drowned out in the busy field.

Music in the father's house. Not a pick-up band hired for a single party, but music always there. Music from the beginning time when God hung the universe with stars, switched on the lights, left the water running, set the blue earth like a lighted Ferris Wheel turning in the empty sky. Music from the beginning when "morning stars sang together, and the children of God shouted for joy." Music that heals us, music that tames cobras, and draws my dog like a magnet to the old piano, music from little David's harp that gentles the wild king.

Dancing too, the story says. The whole created order invited to move by some First Composer – "rivers clap their hands", say the psalms, "mountains sing aloud, tides and seasons come in on time, the swirling dance of miraculous patterns perfectly balanced in time and in tune as though by the beat of a Conductor's hand.

It's literally true, we now know. What poets call "the music of the spheres" is not metaphor but fact. Astronomers now tell us a great low B Flat hums and pulses between and deep beneath the wheeling stars.

And not just the stars. A Japanese geneticist (Dr. Susumu Ohno) has assigned timed musical notes instead of alphabet letters to our strands of DNA, scoring them for violin and flute. People hearing their own music for the first time are sometimes moved to tears, he says. Instead of the survival of the fittest, we can now speak of individuals, nations, churches that stay in key, follow the score, refract and reflect the original joyful sound. Or not. Sadly, we know they're also free to reduce and distort it into discord that hurts our ears and breaks God's heart.

II

Congregations all make their distinctive music – music that unfolds and reveals itself over many years – like John Cage's remarkable composition currently playing in Halberstadt, Germany to commemorate their first organ of 1361. It unfolds at the rate of one chord every few years – sustained by weights on the pedals. The performance will conclude, they say, in the year 2640.

Our first chord here began 122 years ago. The performance continues on. In 1887, 204 members voted to build a 1200-seat church here. Jim Bradshaw's grandmother (or was it great-grand-mother?) was at that meeting. There were five elders; four had districts south of Bloor Street, the other everyone who lived north. Our first minister, Dr W.G. Wallace, was called from Georgetown to tap his baton. Someone recalled that "the spirit of the congregation on a Sunday was quiet and warm. There they sat, expectant, awaiting the minister and God," he said. "Then (Dr. Wallace) came in, a human, vital soul. We loved his prayers, reverent, intimate, real. He was speaking with God, for us and for the world." That's how our music here began.

Dr. Wallace stayed for 30 years. Before he left, he foresaw how this community would change. "The university will remain," he wrote. "There will always be hundreds of students to whom this congregation might reasonably be expected to minister. But In years ahead," he went on, we will need to give "best consideration" to combining with other congregations in the area "so that there will always be a strong, vital, throbbing centre of religious activity here."

The music played on. Bloor Street women moved tables to the halls of Knox College with coffee and refreshments for exam-weary students. Andy Spears' grandmother and others forged a relationship with St. Christopher House where, I think, he's still on the Board. George Pidgeon, first Moderator of our United Church led us into the first ecumenical church union in the world, and conducted here for 33 years. I remember taking communion to him on Bedford Road, a frail old man who couldn't see; he insisted I use the fresh translation of the New English Bible. At his funeral here, the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Canada brought respectful memories – "he was our Moderator too," he said.

Ernie Howse arrived in 1948, and conducted memorably for 22 years. He helped us reach out to Muslims and the world at large. He stood strong for a believable and literate Christianity week by week here in this strategic place at the door of the great university. That was our sound here. Lois Marshall sang it. Fred Sylvester played it on the organ, joined later by Don Gillies' 60 voice choirs & David Passmore's amazing musicality and fresh rhythms. Recent conductors, with gifted colleagues, continued to lead us into scherzos and cadenzas never heard before - Cliff, Don, Linda and Warren, Martha and Alydia.

For over two decades, David Allan enriched, and surprises us still, with his own imaginative variations. Thirty-eight years ago newspaper front pages showed banners and dancing in these aisles to celebrate the Spadina Expressway Stopped. A gracious older member in a nursing home, distressed at such new sounds from the church he loved, asked for a visit. He lay flat in his bed, the covers up to his neck while I tried to explain the new music. After half an hour, he graciously offered to see me out. Throwing the covers back, to the astonishment of this young minister he arose from his bed, like Lazarus, fully clothed, in three piece suit, tie, and shined black shoes, and walked me to the elevator.

The music went on. Ushers here in striped pants and morning coats adjusted as nursing mothers in jeans from Rochdale across the street sat on the floor before these pews, St Matthew Passion scores open on their knees. American refugees from the Vietnam War sat beside Chief Justices and full professors gravely welcoming children who'd been told to "give a balloon to someone who looks like he needs one." Announcements went on and on, just like always. I'd turn to David, ask if I'd left anything out. "The Benediction," he often replied.

III

Music from the father's house. But notice this in Jesus' story. The harmony is not imposed. As Jesus tells it, no one is forced to sing the father's tune. The boys are free to grab their share and dance their own way out the door.

The gift was unstinting. Not a word to either of fatherly I-know-best advice No conditions. No requirements. We might have wished for some. Wasn't the father too lavish, too prodigal with his gifts? Wouldn't it be better if there was firmer "governance" and "accountability", if we had fewer choices, and were forced to dance the proper steps, as acorns are forced to be oaks, so that churches automatically cared about the world as much as they do about themselves, crosses turned to candy-canes, and goodness won out in the end?

But that's not the world anyone we know lives in. In Jesus' story it's the father's pleasure to leave the choice to us. The two boys grabbed their gifts and ran, one to consumer heaven where he waited for a billion dollar bail-out, the other to ten-hour days at the office storing up resentment, envy and pride.

They overrode the primal rhythm in their genes and played their private tunes. Before long, as Jesus tells it they ended up in the land of botched beginnings and frayed endings. Music that danced them out the house in hope unraveled into unresolved discords. It hurt their ears, hunched their shoulders, dragged down the corners of their Sunday morning mouths, gave them headaches at Presbytery and church committee meetings. There was no coherence or purpose anymore. It was like arriving in the middle of a fugue without hearing the initial statement of the theme. They lost track of the tune from the father's house.

One boy did hear again, the end of the story says, but he covered his ears and refused to listen. The other remembered it faintly when he "came to himself", maybe catching it full volume only when he heard the running feet, saw loving hands stretched out (still marked maybe from wood on the watching gatepost) and was enveloped at last by his father's welcoming arms.

IV

But don't be too hard on the boys. In a world like ours, the tune is easily lost. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a lot about music. "Music," he said, "will help dissolve your

perplexities, purify your sensibility, and in times of care and sorrow will keep a ground bass of joy alive in you.”

He never lost that ground bass rhythm. No matter competing melodies – the marching feet, the flags, the drums, the dissonance of bombs and camps – how would any of us have caught the primal music among those strident songs? Those who were there say he never lost the tune.

Columnist Martin Marty recalled words that Bonhoeffer wrote from prison. “God wants us to love him eternally with our whole hearts”, he wrote, “(and so make) a kind of steady song, or *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint.”

Cantus firmus, my musician friends advise me, refers to a prevailing musical theme that, like ocean undertow, runs deep beneath confusing tunes in other voices above. It is their ground and steadiness. It holds them together through dissonance, discord, and incompleteness until inevitable resolving harmony at the end. It is music from the father’s house that’s underneath and always there. “Worst calamities can be borne”, Bonhoeffer said, “as long as the *steady song* continues through the rich polyphony of life.”

“I’ve tried to build my life around this metaphor”, says Marty, “I commend it to all who would find fortitude and cease to whine about every dirty toss and deal of the cards.”

V

Still, the tune is easily lost. Many years ago, in a university chorus, I often found it hard to find, let alone keep the second tenor line. What saved me from dismissal was standing beside a lovely man who read music perfectly, and sang clearly in my ear. At church this morning we stand beside such reminding voices. Not just singers in the next pew, but Bonhoeffer whose voice we remember again. Voices, too, of fathers who once stood beside us rumbling the bass line of “Praise My Soul”, grandmothers who took the alto part though they couldn’t read music at all. You can hear them - McRuer’s, Gibson’s, Bradshaws, Charles’, Cross’s, Wilson’s, and others named on these windows, whose lives are built into who we are, and make the background music to which we sing today.

The church, like every church, is an echo chamber. Just when we've lost the tune again in structures and protocol we're caught unawares. Maybe in familiar hymn chords that choke our throats, a preacher's triggering word, a baby's unmarked face, an unbidden memory. And there it is again, the familiar steady song, the *cantus firmus* from the father's house – music from home where we belong.

And not just at church. Waking early, as south-bound birds alarm the morning sky, or unexpected on PBS as Andrea Bocelli's *Bridge Over Troubled Waters* ambushes us and wets our eyes. It's as though we're carried then where words and resolutions can never go – to the edge of some great orchestral chord, on the way, but not to be completed yet, some music from another sphere – beyond our grasp but not our hearing – a harmony for which the world was made, and toward which, despite ourselves sometimes, the church, and all of us, are still and always drawn.

Jesus' story says it's music from the father's house, from "our eternal home", as the old hymn says. A *steady song* which we forget, but which has not forgotten us. Music, the story says, neither expected nor deserved nor earned. Music that flows, Jesus says, from the father's prodigal love which never stops, or waits for us to say the right words, or read the right prayer. Love which runs out from all its dignity right down the road when one boy starts for home, pushing past his half-apology to sing the welcome song. Love which also leaves the music inside and goes again to the busy fields, to worried churches and weary Councils trying their hardest, wanting only for those who are out of tune to join the dance where they belong.

Others come at this news in other ways, other traditions, other faiths. In our part of God's great orchestra, Jesus, who told the story first, is music from the Father's house come looking for us. Browning says, for us he is "the C Major chord" - Christ music all the way from home spilling out the doors into the land of dissonance and discord where we live and where we hide. Music of reconciliation with those we've hurt. Music of belonging with those we've left outside. Music to put its arms around us and make things right, and hold us fast.

Jesus didn't tell us at the end if the busy brother remained outside, or finally decided to go in and join the music. We're left to write that story's end ourselves. Rubem Alves of Argentina outlines our choice. "You may dance the tune played by the present reality," he says. "Your life will be realistic and pragmatic."

“Or,” he goes on, tapping his baton, “you may choose to move your body (and your church) under the spell of a mysterious tune and rhythm which come from a world we do not yet see.”

“Hope,” Alves says, “is hearing the melody of God’s future. Faith is dancing it now.”

The *cantus firmus*, the steady song. Bloor Street has sung it for more than a century. When we hear it – and God prays we will - our life together as church, will be steadied; we’ll “stop whining”, and start to dance again.

When we lose the tune – and we’ll do that too, the church and the world being as they are – then remember the good news. There is music in the father’s house - Advent music ringing down the road again next week. Music that waits for us by the watching gatepost, longs for us. Music that will find us, in our old church and in our lives, hold us, help us dance on down the road, and one day, bring the whole world home.

To the centering of our souls, the recovery of our church’s rhythm, the tuning of our discordant world, and the glory of the Great Conductor’s hand. Amen.

References:

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