

The Unsung Hymnal
UU Church of Vancouver
August 20, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars

*Jesus keep me near the cross,
There's a precious fountain
Free to all a healing stream
Flows from Calvary's mountain*

Refrain:

*In the cross, in the cross
Be my glory ever;
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.*

Singing that hymn (written by Fanny Crosby in 1869) brings me back to my childhood church at 448 Duncan St in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Maxwell Chapel Baptist was established in 1905 and served as a place of worship for my family.

Pictured here as it appears today, the church did not have the added wing on the right, which serves as a kitchen and dining area, when I was younger. The bricking was also added with the expansion.

My grandfather, Joseph Owens, served as deacon. I was three years old when he died and have no memory of him. My grandmother, Minnie Owens, would later serve as the church mother. The title church mother epitomizes the time-honored tradition and is still vibrant.

For generations, pastors and congregants have cherished these devout women for their wisdom, faith, and dedication. Church mothers serve in a variety of roles across a broad spectrum as an elder and wise African American woman in the church. Usually, I sat with my family during church services.

When I was five and my mother ushered, I got to sit with my grandmother in the pew to the right of the pulpit. I loved her dearly. She was like the Queen Mother. I loved it when she would reach into her purse and hand me a peppermint candy.

When they prepared for the offering, the choir would sing as the female ushers walked down the aisles dressed in white gloves and starched pressed white uniforms, similar to the white uniforms nurses wore years ago.

The male ushers were attired in dark suits and white shirts with solid dark ties. They too wore white gloves. Their precision was similar to my military attire and bearing that I had during my time in service.

My high school classmate and friend Jimmy told me last Tuesday, when I was home for a visit, that his church finally allowed the male ushers to wear polo shirts with slacks in the summer instead of the dark suits that were too hot this time of year.

Although I am not a Baptist member today, a little bit of that African American tradition still runs through my veins and the memories will be forever.

Sermon: The Unsung Hymnal by Allison King

In my 25 years of experience as a musician in UU churches, I have come across an interesting phenomenon. We are singing only about 25% of the hymns in our hymnal. Not only that, but in all of the churches that I've served, we're mostly ignoring the same songs.

So, I began to investigate that - what are the reasons that we sing what we do sing? What are the reasons that we **don't** sing certain things? What does that say about us?

A google search on "the purpose of hymn singing" turns up some interesting results. Hymns are meant to teach; according to one source, they use poetry to open us to the word of god. Here's

a list I particularly like; hymn singing is physical. Hymn singing is emotional. It's thoughtful, instructive, (going back to that teaching thing), it's memorable. How many of you who come from a different religious tradition still feel moved hearing an old hymn that spoke to you back then, even though the theology no longer fits? For me, it's "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," which was one of my grandmother's favorites. Whenever I hear that, I don't think about the theology that I no longer agree with, I think about the love that my grandmother gave me, and how much I miss her.

Hymn singing is envisioning, encouraging, and my personal favorite - corporate. We do it together. It isn't just to break up the spoken parts of a service, although it works really, really well for that - it's to create a "we" during our time together. It creates community.

I dug deep into the hymnal to look at the things we don't sing, and I went through every single one of them. I have read every word, and sung every note of this hymnal, and you know what? There are some darn good reasons why we don't sing some things. Some of them are just unsingable.

The unsung hymns fall into 3 major categories: Oldies with God Language or really out of date lyrics; hymns from different cultures; and the weirdos - unusual tunes, rhymes, or bizarre lyrics. I'm really looking forward to sharing some of those with you.

Our opening hymn was an oldie - "For All the Saints." It's a beautiful example of language conventions we no longer use - "thou waste their rock, their shelter, and their might" - but wow, isn't that a great tune to sing? And it has alleluias! It's so much fun, but really difficult to program these days, when we aren't thinking about blest communions of saints or shining in glory.

In case you were wondering how hymns do get programmed, Rev. Kathryn and I collaborate on hymn selection. My first objective, always, with any music for worship is to serve the service.

Are the words relevant to the sermon? Will the singing of this hymn drive the point home, will it help settle the message in our bodies more?

The second criterion is: have we done this lately? Different ministers have different feelings about how often to sing hymns. I've been places where there's a "hymn of the month" that gets done every Sunday for a month. I've been places where there's a rotation of about 10 or 12 opening hymns, so that people can get familiar with them and not have to think too much in that first experience of the service. I've been somewhere where they sang "Enter, Rejoice, and Come In" every dang week, until I talked them into the aforementioned hymn rotation program. And I've been places (and you probably have, too) where "Spirit of Life" is sung every week. So, I have a bit of a prejudice about programming hymns too frequently, and I like to stir in the unfamiliar from time to time.

My third criterion is: is this even singable? Sometimes the answer to that is a distinct "no," so buckle up for some musical weirdness.

Before we get into singing, I'd like to give you a little tour of the hymnal - there's tons of info in there about authors and composers and such. Let's open up to number 101 - Abide with Me. Looking at the bottom left of the page, we see the author's and composer's names and dates, and on the bottom right, we see the word EVENTIDE, and 10.10.10.10. Huh? Eventide is the name of the tune, and the 10.10.10 business is the metrical setting of the tune. More about that in a second. Looking at the bottom of #102, you'll notice that there's a tiny chalice in front of the author of the words. That means that it's a Unitarian, a universalist, or a Unitarian Universalist who wrote the words. For some of these hymns, it means that a U, U, or UU wrote the original words, and for some of them, it means that they re-cast the words from something objectionable into something palatable for the modern UU.

Now, back to that 10.10.10.10 thing. Flip to the back of the hymnal and find what's called the Metrical Index of tunes. Here you see a list of all of the metrical settings by hymn tune, and you

can see that there are many tunes that can fit into that metric. So if you really love the words of say, #190 Light of Ages and of Nations, but don't want to sing the tune because it was one of Hitler's favorites, you can sing the same words to #189. I'm cheating a little bit with that example because it's already set in the hymnal that way for this very reason. I have actually done this as well, setting the words of #289 Creative Love, Our Thanks We Give to the tune of #15, The Lone, Wild Bird, which we sang "as is" for our meditation.

Let's go back to #101, Abide With Me and sing verses 1 and 2. As we sing, I want to invite you to let the music be the thing that stays with you. Let the experience of making sound, using your body as an instrument, be the thing that moves you.

Sing #101.

Let's look at another one that I love, but that I can almost guarantee that we will never sing in a service here, except for now. Please turn to #87, Nearer My God to Thee. I want to invite you to feel this as a meditation. I also want to invite those of you harmonically inclined to find the harmonies, to richen the aural tapestry of this piece as we sing. (1 verses)

That's some heavy-duty Christian imagery, especially if you read through the rest of the verses. What does it say about us that we don't sing this one? It says that we're not Christian. I think it's really important to point out here that while we aren't a Christian church per se, we are not anti-Christian. Christian hymns are in this book because a lot of Unitarians are Christians. There is a Christian Unitarian fellowship that has a web page, and meets as a body during GA. So this hymn, and others, is for them. We are serving a lot of different faith expressions through this hymnal.

One more oldie - let's look at #26 - Holy, Holy, Holy (2 verses)

Let's move on to some of the ones that come from different cultures. If you turn to #176 in the hymnal, you'll see that we are now in the "Music of the Cultures of the World" section, which has precisely 5 hymns. We didn't go out too far on that limb. There are several hymns that are set to Filipino, Native American, and Chinese tunes, but with words that have nothing to do with the original song. A good example of this is #194, Faith is a Forest. That's a Chinese folk tune, with words by the late UU composer Shelley Jackson Denham.

Going back to #176, this one is a Hindu prayer, with a traditional Indian tune. Let's just sing a little bit of it to get the flavor of it. (Sing refrain of 176). I think this piece is lovely, but unless you're going to spend a significant amount of time with the congregation learning it, it is not suitable for congregational singing. And that is not welcoming to a newcomer.

Looking at 178 Raghupati - this one is a bit easier to sing and learn, but I would still have trouble finding a way to fit this one into the rotation. It does work nicely as a meditation, though. It is also a traditional Hindu prayer and song. Let's sing the refrain and first verse, and then repeat the refrain.

Now, turn the page and just take a look at #179. That is the kind of thing that can scare a congregant silly. Even though it's just rhythm notation, it's confusing to look at, and without any harmonic structure to support the melody, makes for a somewhat unsatisfying singing experience.

Let's move on to the weirdos - my favorites. There are A LOT of hymns that fit in to this category, and I'd like to start with my very favorite, #94, What is This Life. We'll do just one verse.

I don't know about you, but the mention of farmyard animals doesn't put me in a spiritual frame of mind. I mean, I get the sentiment, but save the ink next time, hymnal commission.

So many weirdos, so little time....

60 1 vs

82

124

185 just to look at

291

302

319 companion

310 - to look at

316

I could go on...but thankfully, time constrains. I do this service for a couple of reasons - 1, I like to explore the unfamiliar. I like to stretch the congregation musically and theologically and try to help us to see if we can wrap our minds and our voices around new ideas and melodies. 2, I do this to give a gentle nudge to those of us who may have tender places around hymns from a previous faith tradition, and to see if there's a way to make room for those old, beloved songs that got left behind.

What does what we sing say about us? What does what we **don't** sing about us? I hope it just means that we're a little bit unadventurous when it comes to hymns. I hope it doesn't mean that we are holding on to old wounds that keep us from growing and being open.

Joyce Poley, composer of When Our Heart is In a Holy Place shared a story with me about how one choir member insisted on not singing any traditional words to the Christmas carols they were planning for the Christmas Eve service, because that person had been so wounded by the religious tradition of their upbringing. Other choir members were upset, because they didn't have negative connotations from their histories, and just wanted to enjoy singing the words that they remembered. And this is what Joyce said to me, that I have carried with me since - we

do it for each other. We sing these songs together because, while it might not mean something to you, it might mean everything to the person next to you.

So let us joyfully sing, for each other, our closing hymn, #29, Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee, set to Beethoven's Ode to Joy. I invite you to rise in body, spirit, voice, and all the ways in which you can rise, and let's sing.