

“Can We Bring It?”

February 12, 2023

Rev. Bill Eichhorn



First Reading

Psalm 100:1-2

Revised Standard Version

Shout for Joy to God, all the lands!
Serve God with gladness!
Come into God's presence with joyful singing!

Second Reading

Exodus 15:1, 2

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to God, giving voice together:
“I'm singing my heart out to God – what a victory!
He pitched horse and rider into the sea.
God is my strength, God is my song.”

Third Reading

Ephesians 5:19

Revised Standard Version

... be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.

A comment on the reading from Exodus 15: Moses and the Israelites are singing their hearts out because of the miracle of being freed from slavery in Egypt, where they made bricks from mud and straw for the Pharaoh. Whatever happened at the Red Sea, this much is clear: When Pharaoh's chariots and infantry pursued the escaping slaves, who waded across the Red Sea, those heavy wheeled chariots got mired down in the mud and were unable to pursue the Israelites, so Moses and the people (the text says) are singing their hearts out. Later in Exodus 15 we learn that Moses's sister Miriam and all the women are singing their hearts out as well. The singing is all about the miracle of freedom – “the horses and the riders have been pitched into the sea.”

Two weeks ago, Rev. Davena Jones, the UCC Conference Interim Minister, was our guest preacher in the 10 o'clock service. After the service, Jolyn told me the chat was full of positive comments, and two people asked why Davena couldn't apply to be our minister. In our Stone Soup conversation later that week, the question was raised about what CCC might have to offer a Black pastor. One person said it seemed like a minister of color would be making a big sacrifice in coming here, having to give up that "at home" feeling in a congregation of their own racial heritage. Another comment: "Why should we ask a pastor from a nonwhite church tradition to do our work for us?"

As I watched Davena try to coax a few "Amen's" out of us that morning, I remembered another Sunday morning in a large African American church in Boston. It was 1990, when Ann and I were on the UCC National staff. Part of the ministry of our division was to support local congregations doing racial justice work in their communities. We had provided a grant to the Eliot United Church of Christ in Roxbury, and they invited me to give the sermon on their Recognition Sunday, a day when children being promoted in Sunday school received bibles and lay leaders were recognized for their service and leadership. As the Bibles and certificates were passed out, the congregation celebrated with applause. The choir sang. The pastor told a few stories about the work being done in the community. It took awhile. When I got up to preach, the sanctuary was still rocking from the praise song the choir had sung. People in the pews were catching their breath from being on their feet, singing, dancing. Like Moses and Miriam, they were "singing their hearts out to God." I couldn't help but notice the large clock at the back of the sanctuary – a clock placed in the direct line of sight with the pulpit. It said 12:10. The service had started at 11:00!

Things settled and I told the congregation something they already knew. "You know," I said, "I come from a white church tradition where the sermon lasts fifteen minutes, maybe 20, but longer than that, folks are in the aisles headed for the door. Now I know that is not your tradition, but that clock back there tells me Sunday dinners are in the oven. Folks will soon feel those hunger pangs, so I'm gonna keep this short." But before I could begin the sermon, a loud voice from the back said, "No! You preach it, Reverend. Preach it." Other voices spoke up and then it was like a chant. Better, it was more like a cheer at a football game. "Preach it! Preach it! I nodded and preached for 25 minutes, some of it completely improvised. I loved their responsive "amens." At one point, the organist interrupted me by playing the first few bars of "Go Down, Moses" because my biblical passage for that sermon was Exodus 15. Talk about making a melody to the Lord! That Sunday morning I experienced what it feels to be lifted up by the pulsing spiritual energy of a congregation, how their passion, their joyful singing opened my heart, inspired me to say things I hadn't thought of when I wrote the sermon. Those folks, my friends, knew how to bring it. They stood in a Black spiritual tradition that could bring into worship an amazing energy.

And that brings me back to that comment from Stone Soup, that it would be a huge sacrifice for a pastor from the African American tradition to come here as our pastor. Why? Because at the moment, dear friends, we are not bringing it on Sunday morning in our services. We are not, I believe, generating that dynamic spiritual energy that lifts us up, that could attract people to come here, to join their voices with ours.

Recently, a new person walked into the sanctuary several minutes before the service. Scott had not arrived yet, so no music. Several of us who are involved in the service were working on the set-up. The kitchen angels were preparing coffee and snacks. The new person sat for a few minutes, looked around and then left. Whatever she saw and felt wasn't enough to keep her in that chair. In her sermon, Rev. Jones asked us a very pointed, very important question. She reminded us that all UCC congregations say that everyone is welcome. You know how we say it: "We are an Open and Affirming Church and no matter who you are, or where you are in your life's journey, you are welcome here." She paused, looked around the congregation and then, spreading her arms, she asked "But what have you done to make sure that all feel welcome to your table?"

Now, I know we think of ourselves as a friendly, welcoming church. One of you told me recently that we think anyone who walks in here will fall in love with us right away because we are so friendly. We are a warm and caring bunch, but perhaps we've lost our edge when it comes to welcoming new people. For nearly two years our front doors were closed, and David extended a welcome to all on Zoom. Not the same, friends, as being welcomed at the front door, by someone with a warm greeting. A greeting that might go something like this:

Good morning. We are so glad you are joining us today and that you brought your children. We have an activity bag for them to enjoy during the service and a playground for after the service. Over there is our labyrinth you are welcome to walk. To conserve paper, we don't use paper bulletins, but the large screen at the front of the sanctuary guides us through the service. Coffee and tea are served at the kitchen counter. The gentleman at the inner doorway is Rog, and he would like to give you a name tag and answer any questions you have about CCC. Again, welcome to CCC this morning.

Many of you have been greeters in the past and extended a genuine welcome to church members as well as newcomers. You know how to do that, but as I said, I think the two years of COVID isolation have dulled our welcoming ability, maybe dampened our enthusiasm a bit. We are still finding our way back from isolation to community. So how do we get back to bringing it? How do we renew our welcoming ability so it is spirited and warm, and most importantly, so it is genuinely inclusive? Did you notice that in my simulated welcome I didn't ask: *Is this your first time here? What brought you here today?* Asking questions is not welcoming. It puts people on the spot. Instead of asking questions that might sound like an interrogation to some people, introduce them to yourself, to CCC. When we welcome someone we think is new, let's not ask: *May I help you?* That sounds polite, right? But what if that new person is of a different culture or race, someone who doesn't look like us, a young person who is withdrawn and has obviously been crying, a man who appears to be homeless, an interracial couple with two children, an African American young adult with braids, someone like Devan Fromer? For them, asking *May I help you?* might very well sound like we think they don't belong here, that we think they have come to the wrong place.

Folks, we need a greeter at our front door by 9:45 for the 10:00 o'clock service. Rog is there every Sunday providing information and name tags, taking prayer requests and greeting people, but we need someone outside by the front door offering an initial greeting. I think we also need a greeter in the seminar room by 8:15, and we need those of you drinking coffee before that service to keep an

eye out for new people coming through the front door. Help us bring back an inclusive, enthusiastic welcome. Sandra Weil has a list of the current greeters for the 10:00 o'clock service. Please see Sandra and join them if you are so moved.

Davena's question, "What have we done to make sure that all feel welcome at our table?" is, I believe, our most important work during this interim period, as the Search Team works to find our next pastor. There are many very talented UCC pastors who are persons of color: African and Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American, Latino and Latina, as well as pastors who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Many are looking for a progressive, inclusive congregation committed to social justice and working to evolve into a new expression of Christianity. That would be us. We have shown our commitment to be an Open and Affirming congregation by calling two gay pastors and one lesbian pastor, as well as hiring several seminary interns. What work do you think we need to do in order to make persons of color feel welcome here, whether one such person is our next minister or someone looking for a welcoming, inclusive church community?

I have one more suggestion to offer about work we need to do. We need to bring the energy back to our singing, as we are urged to do in our readings this morning:

"Shout for joy to God"

"Sing our heart out to God"

"Filled with the Spirit ... sing and make melody to the Lord
with all your heart."

Singing infuses our 10:00 o'clock worship with a celebratory energy like nothing else. Scott's piano and the young signers he enlists bring it every Sunday. But friends, we need to do our part to bring that energy of the heart. In the 8:30 service, our chants and songs need to resonate more fully the contemplative attitude of gratitude, of joy to complement the quiet. Perhaps we need to have a song leader for each service, someone to help us not only sing the right notes, but someone to help us sing our hearts out.

During COVID when we couldn't be here in this building, Zoom held us together every Sunday, kept us in touch. We are grateful that Zoom continues to bring some of you here on Sunday morning who live far away or have a compromised health issue. But I've got a message for those of you who are staying home out of comfort and joining us on Zoom: *Please come back to the room.* You all come on down! We need your presence to welcome new people, to hug old friends, to live out the questions together hand in hand, to support the fragile, to protect the wounded. We continue to follow practices designed to keep everyone safe, so come on down.

Let us rise up for one another. Let's do it again and again. Let us rise up and create a church whose welcoming spirit and commitment to justice is a light on this hill. Let us rise up. All we need is hope and for that we have each other. So let's bring it on.