

Sermon

August 28, 2016

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Spirituals/Gospel Music with the UCC Wisconsin Gospellers

Exodus 3:7-12, Luke 6:20-26

## The Improbable is Never Impossible with God

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Amen.

This morning we're blessed to have as part of our worship experience the music of the UCC Wisconsin Gospellers, along with other singers from the Madison Christian Community. Thank you for your witness in song!

Gospel music has taken many forms and crosses cultural boundaries, but the genre originated in the early 1900's out of the Black churches of the urban North. It was widely promoted by Thomas Dorsey, an African American pianist and blues singer.<sup>1</sup> Gospel songs were a fusion of African American spirituals and the blues."<sup>2</sup>

Spirituals come to us through the oral tradition of enslaved Africans. The authorship of specific songs is unknown, and they were communal in nature. There were no written scores. Remember, it was illegal for enslaved persons to read or write, so many of the songs were learned and sung by call and response.

Today I want to focus on the deepest roots of gospel music, the spirituals.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://symposium.music.org/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=8775:negro-spirituals-and-gospel-music-is-there-a-diff&Itemid=124](http://symposium.music.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=8775:negro-spirituals-and-gospel-music-is-there-a-diff&Itemid=124)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.spiritualsproject.org/sweetchariot/History/>

When I was a teenager, plucking songs with my guitar in youth group and around campfires, there were some old standbys like “It Only Takes a Spark” and “They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.” Remember those? Okay, I’m dating myself!

Another song we used to sing all the time was Kumbayah. I’m sure most of you know that one. I sang it for years—an embarrassing number of years!—before I knew that it was a spiritual. I knew that the words were in an African language, but I never tied the song to its context, until I heard it sung as a lament in a video portraying the Gullah people. The Gullah are descendants of enslaved West Africans who labored on islands off of the coast of South Carolina.

Kumbayah. Sweet, but also haunting. Come by hear, my Lord, the song insists. Come *here* to your people who knew the pain of the Middle Passage and the sting of the lash. Kumbayah.

The song is as rich as the psalms of lament recorded in scripture, written by another people who knew the despair of being taken from their homeland. They cry out, “Do not be far away from me, God! Let me know that you know what I’m going through, and rescue me, as you have done for your people in the past.”

Knowing that the song Kumbayah arose from a people who knew despair and degradation, and could still sing their confidence in God, opened the song in a new way. It became no longer just a peaceful campfire sentiment or a way to

describe a shallow feel-good “kumbayah moment.” It became a song that connected me profoundly with an expression of the peace-that-can-pass-our-understanding and a longing for God’s respite and rescue.

Spirituals reveal the surprising work of an awesome God. They were an improbable response to an impossible situation. They were a common language for people who had been stolen from a continent, and whose own languages and cultures had been stripped away. The songs gave voice to emotions and experiences, fears and hopes, that weren’t safe to express in any other way.

The spirituals were profoundly subversive, in all kinds of ways.

- “This joy I have, the world didn’t give it to me. The world didn’t give it, and the world can’t take it away” expressed a spirit that refused to be broken.
- “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” expressed sorrow for the loss of a motherland and the loss of a child sold away from her mother. It was sung by a people whose familial and social structures were intentionally destroyed in order to maintain the inhumane structure of slavery.

Spirituals boldly named the reality of God’s realm in an un-Godly situation. So did Jesus. Remember his rebellious ride into Jerusalem on a donkey in mocking protest imperial power? The song “Ride on, King Jesus” similarly proclaimed that there was One more powerful than the slave master and the evil of slavery.

Christianity was introduced to enslaved Africans as a means of indoctrination and control. Stacey Floyd Thomas refers to the use of the religion as a means to propagate slavery as “America’s Christian slavocracy.”<sup>3</sup>

While the master wanted the enslaved persons to hear their Christian responsibility to obey the earthly master, the testimony of the slave songs reveals that the master’s religion instead became a means of deliverance. They were this improbable response to an impossible situation. They declared a reversal of the slaveholding establishment, in the name of the master’s God, and they did it within earshot!

Songs about pie in the sky by-and-by, a theme of reward in heaven for any suffering on earth are also common in the spirituals repertoire. These songs, if interpreted literally, wholly served the slave-holding economy. But the language was being re-purposed. “Steal away to Jesus” wasn’t only a song about going home to heaven, but provided an encoded message for enslaved persons planning to run away. “Be ready!” it told them. “Your Moses is coming tonight.” And “Wade in the Water” wasn’t just a song about baptism or the biblical rivers. It was also a song learned by those who were running away from enslavement. It was a signal to literally move into a stream or river along the way North when the dogs of slave-catchers were following their scent.

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<sup>3</sup> Mining the Motherlode, p 115.

In this way, spirituals are similar to the apocalyptic writing in the Bible, such as in the books of Daniel and Revelation. They used symbols to speak about an unjust political and social system so that the meanings would be ‘hidden in plain sight’ for the intended community, yet wholly veiled to the oppressors.

Spirituals were an improbable response to an impossible situation. They sang out God’s liberation story of Moses defeating Pharaoh, Joshua winning the battle of Jericho, and Jesus’ defeating dehumanizing powers and principalities. Even as their bodies were bought and sold and bred, the spirituals gave witness to a people who knew of their sacred humanity, and they invoked God’s judgment on any who dared keep God’s people in chains. Someday, the songs announce, the upside down world of injustice *would* be made right by the God of Israel and the redemptive work of Jesus. If God had made “a way out of no way” for the Hebrew people, surely God was making a way out of bondage for them. As James Cone states it, the liberating message of the spirituals is that “God can be trusted to stand by God’s word. God does not lie.”<sup>4</sup> The meek *shall* inherit the earth.

Their story of the enslaved persons as it comes to us in the spirituals is that they believed God’s fundamental nature was justice and liberation. Dwight Hopkins puts it like this: “For (those who were) human property, righteousness corrected unjust relations and placed the divinity squarely on the side of the

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<sup>4</sup> The Spirituals and the Blues, p 32.

oppressed. How could it be otherwise?”<sup>5</sup>

How could it be otherwise? The story of God’s people is full of improbable responses of hope and mercy and grace in the midst of impossible situations.

How can it be otherwise for us, as well? We find ourselves in a time of anxiety, enslaved by the fear-mongering and oppressions of our own day. Do we trust a God who does not lie?

How might our singing the spirituals into our very bones, in solidarity with the oppressed, become a way to subvert the inherently unjust systems in which we continue to flounder? How might our singing the faith of the enslaved help us work out how to cooperate with our way-maker God? How might the spirituals be for us a way to connect deeply with our own emotions of sorrow or joy?

The spirituals were an improbable response to an impossible situation, and we have inherited their gifts. Through them we learn that justice for all of God’s children was not only possible, but foregone conclusion. We learn of God’s “already” work on our behalf, however we are bound.

Are we willing to sing ourselves into participation in this mighty, sea-parting, stone-rolling work?

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue, p 10-11.