"Let Your Life Sing"

A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – June 11, 2023
Second Sunday After Pentecost – Lesson: John 15:1-4, 9-11

Gracious God, in this time of worship, prayer, and reflection, may your Holy Spirit move among us, breathe into us new life and new inspiration, and give us renewed energy and courage to sing the heart-song of love that is uniquely ours to offer. Amen.

If your life was a musical, what would it sound like? Who would be in the cast of characters? Where would it be set? What songs would fill its score? Perhaps there would be songs about family, community, your life's work, your joys and triumphs, your struggles and challenges, moments of transformation and change, key milestones, and those unforgettable moments that have given your life its deepest sense of meaning and purpose.

And, if you had to pick one song, what would be your showstopper solo? What would be that song that moves audience members to tears of inspiration, that lets them peek inside of your soul, that lets them find a little of themselves in your story, in your pivotal moments? If it was just you, the lead character, alone on the stage in the spotlight, singing a soulful song into the hushed darkness of the theater, what would you sing?

One of the reasons that musical theater can be such a powerful art form to experience is because the songs of the characters on stage can become our songs, even if only for a few minutes. Julie mentioned that in her Carillon article this week and I agree. We connect to the characters on a human level and resonate with the the universal themes their songs express – love in its many forms, longing, loss, the will to overcome obstacles, the courage to carry on despite difficult circumstances, the desire to find purpose and meaning, the power of community, the struggle to right the wrongs of the world, and more. Many of these themes are highlighted in the songs our musicians are offering today.

Good theater is rooted in good storytelling. Sometimes good stories offer us inspiring role models whose aspirations mirror our own. Others may serve as cautionary tales. Sometimes good stories have a clear hero or villain. Others have characters that are more complicated. We connect with a good story because it speaks to our human condition and we are invited in to go along for the ride. And when good stories are told musically, with emotion, soulfulness, and honesty, they can speak to us quite powerfully.

True story: as I was writing these few paragraphs at home the other day, I suddenly heard the haunting melody of *Castle on a Cloud* from *Les Misérables* wafting into my bedroom window. A neighbor was either watching the movie or listening to the soundtrack really loudly. They turned down the volume after a few minutes.

But, there's a good example – it's the song of a little girl whose life is harder than it should be, who is a victim of the injustice in her society, expressing her dream and longing for a better life, a home, a loving family. In hearing her song, in allowing it to speak to us and move us, we connect with her dream and her longing on some level, even though our circumstances are different. And her song and story inspire our compassion for her and for those in similar situations. That is, of course, one of the reasons Victor Hugo wrote his novel in the first place.

Good art and good stories meet us in our own experiences, inspire us, challenge us, move us to work for positive change in the world, and help us reflect on own lives as we continue to shape our own stories.

This is true of the biblical stories too, of course. When we read scripture, we see something of ourselves, our own lives, and our own journeys of faith in the characters, situations, metaphors, and ideas we encounter in the text. The ways in which God is in relationship with humanity come to life to us, in part, because we take up the stories of those who have gone before us in faith and make them our own. Their stories and their songs become our own.

And there are a lot of songs in the Bible too, by the way – an entire book of Psalms, and a lot of songs of women – songs of Miriam the sister of Moses, Deborah the judge, Hannah the mother of the prophet Samuel, and Mary the mother of Jesus. In Mary, Mother of Jesus: The Musical, the Magnificat would be her showstopper – that prophetic song of praise she offers when she meets Elizabeth to tell her the good news that she is expecting a child.

So, how do we find our showstopper, our heart-song, that unique and wonderful expression of our voice, our story, that the world needs to hear? Because each of us has one.

In 1999, Quaker author and educator, Parker Palmer, wrote a book entitled, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. In it, he shares his own journey of finding direction, purpose, and a meaningful sense of vocation in his life. His was not a linear journey and he is open about when he needed to change direction and how he discovered that. He's also very candid about his own struggle with depression, which was both very difficult *and* ended up being a real teacher to him. He eventually claimed that his experience of depression compelled him "to find the river of life hidden beneath the ice."

The word vocation comes from the Latin root, *vocare*, meaning "to call" and shares a root with words like vocal and voice. Palmer suggested that as we discover and live into our vocation, our calling, we find our voice and our very life speaks (or sings, I would add).

For Parker Palmer, this process of discerning our vocation is largely an internal one. That makes sense for someone rooted in Quaker spirituality. Since we are all shaped and influenced by many external forces and voices throughout our lives, we may find that we need to carve out some time and space to intentionally listen deeply to that voice within us and listen for its leading.

Palmer writes, "Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me *who I am*. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live – but the standards by which I cannot *help* but live if I am living my own life."

What are those standards for you? What are the core values that have shaped and continue to shape your life? When and how have those standards influenced your choices, your sense of direction and purpose in your life? These are good questions that all of us would benefit from reflecting on from time to time.

Part of Palmer's message is that this search for our vocation is a life-long process. Discerning who we are and how we live authentically and fully is about much more than choosing or changing a career

path. That is part of it, but is primarily about discovering who we are at each phase of our lives, what we have to offer the world at that moment, and how we feel led to offer it.

And when we think about vocation from a faith perspective, it's also about who we belong to and how we have been called and equipped by the one who created us and loves us.

Jesus offered his disciples a vocation: a calling to learn from him, to continue his ministries of love after he was gone (ministries of teaching, healing, bridge-building, peacemaking, offering hope), and to teach the next generation to do the same.

Jesus wanted his disciples to bear good fruit, to do the work of love he called them to. And, of course, try as they might, they couldn't do this alone. They needed to know deep within them that they are rooted in God's love. It's what Jesus has been teaching them all along.

And so, he offers this image of the vine. The disciples are not lone actors and neither are we. We are branches on a vine, part of a much bigger interconnected community of growth that is rooted in the love of the God who is making it grow. Jesus calls himself the vine. He is the one who has connected these disciples to one another and nourished them. And Jesus still does this. The heart of Jesus' life and ministry was to bring expression of God's love to the world. And this is the work of the church.

"Abide in me as I abide in you," Jesus said. "Abide in my love, as I abide in God's love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love." And, of course, the greatest commandment he gave them was what? To love – to love God, to love one another, to love their neighbors as themselves, to love even their enemies. Love is the stuff that keeps the vine growing. Love is what we need to survive and thrive. Love is what brings forth good fruit that can offer nourishment to others. Without love, the branches will cease to bear fruit and bring forth a bountiful harvest. Without love, dear branches, we will wither and die on the vine.

And sometimes, like vines, we all need a good pruning. Pruning isn't a bad thing. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Any good gardener will tell you that pruning is an act of maintenance. And God, the good vine-grower, the loving gardener, can help us figure out what needs to be pruned and how best to do it.

What might be taking too much of our energy leaving us too little for what is most important? How can we bear good fruit of love when too much of our energy is going to self-doubt, or competition, or frustration, or judgment, or worry? We can't stop these feelings and experiences from popping up in our lives. But perhaps, with God's help, we can process them, work through them, and prune them back in order to remove some of their power. Pruning is an act of facing our challenges (personally and collectively) and dealing with them, rather than denying them. Pruning makes room for new growth.

At the end of his book, Parker Palmer explores the journey of human self-discovery and discernment of our vocation through the metaphor of the changing seasons of nature. In doing so, he lifts up the truth that this process is both cyclical and ongoing throughout our lives. Just as one season, one year ends – another begins.

He makes the case that viewing our lives and vocations through this ecological lens, in tune with the rhythms of nature, can actually help us be better partners with all creation throughout our lives – to see ourselves as part of a greater, interconnected whole. He says, "we are participants in a vast communion

of being, and if we open ourselves to its guidance, we can learn anew how to live in this great and gracious community of truth. We can, and we must – if we want our sciences to be humane, our institutions to be sustaining, our healings to be deep, our lives to be true."

And, when we pay attention to the lessons offered in the cycles of nature, of life itself, perhaps we might also come to a greater sense of peace and acceptance of our own experiences of transition and change. To be fair, Parker Palmer lives in Wisconsin. So, his experiences of the changing seasons are a *little* more intense than our own here in California. But, nevertheless, I think we can appreciate that each season has something to teach us.

Autumn teaches us that even decay holds beauty. Leaves turn brown, yellow, red and fall to the ground to serve as mulch and make way for new growth. Autumn produce feeds and nourishes other living creatures and, at the same time, plants seeds for future growth. Autumnal times in our lives may include letting go what is no longer needed or is no longer possible to hold onto. That's not always easy. And yet, we hold out hope for the seeds that may be planted in the process, knowing that we may have to wait for a while to see what might grow.

The dormancy and darkness of winter (especially in places like Wisconsin) can teach us the power and beauty of silence in an often-noisy world, the importance of rest (we all need to hibernate now and then), and the value of times of preparation. When faced with a time of transition, it can be tempting to rush into what's next. And sitting in the in-between and unknown is not easy. But winter invites us to take it one day at a time, process where we've been, and prepare for what might unfold next.

Spring, Palmer notes, begins in a muddy mess. But it's in that rich, mucky soil that new life takes root and starts to sprout – slowly at first and then more boldly. Spring is tenacious, adventurous, generous, and courageous in its will to live and give fully and invites the same in us. When we emerge from times of preparation into new movement and action, we live the lessons of spring.

Summer continues spring growth and brings us an appreciation of abundance – fresh produce, long days, the sun's warm rays, the joy of a cool swim or a soft breeze. Perhaps summer's greatest lesson is its invitation to pause in gratitude for the very abundance of grace and love that fills our lives.

"Abide in my love," Jesus said. Abide in my love and you will find your call, your vocation. And you will find your voice. Your song doesn't have to stay the same throughout your life. Some of the lyrics may change. And you may add new stanzas. Your song just has to be yours. You just have to sing it with love. You just have to sing it from your heart.

Amen.