



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker

August 18, 2019 Sermon

Friendship and Music

Scripture Lessons: Hosea 11:1-9, Philippians 2:1-11

Next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, minds, hearts, and spirits . . . This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself that God has created man for the express purpose of praising and extolling God.—Martin Luther

“Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer, [and] unites the faithful in common prayer . . . Congregations are encouraged to use diverse musical forms for prayer as well as those which arise out of the musical life of their own cultures.”—Book of Order, Presbyterian Church (USA)

“Music... will help dissolve your perplexities and purify your character and sensibilities, and in time of care and sorrow, will keep a fountain of joy alive in you.” — Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Sweetest of sweets, I thank you. . . . If I travel in your company, you know the way to heaven’s door.—George Herbert, “Church Music.”

Introduction to Scripture Lessons:

How does God come to us?—that’s the question addressed by our Scripture Lessons today. The passage from Hosea begins an answer, and the one from Paul’s letter to the Philippians continues it. Listen now for God’s Word . . .

Sermon:

Here’s this week’s political philosophy question—it’s based on observations that go back thousands of years, but is still very much relevant today. What do tyrants fear most? That’s the question: What do tyrants fear most?

Vocal dissidents and an organized, underground opposition? Yes, but, dissidents can be thrown in jail and opposition can be rooted out and crushed.

An armed uprising supported by outside powers? Yes, but force can be countered with greater force, and borders can be closed.

Truth?—yes, but truth can be covered up and propaganda can fill the void.

So again, the question: What do tyrants fear the most? The answer is in your bulletin, in the sermon title: friendship and music.

Yes, that’s right, friendship and music.

Don’t believe me? “**46664.**”

That’s the number the South African apartheid regime gave to Nelson Mandela when he was imprisoned at Robben Island. He was the 466th prisoner in the year 1964—hence, his number, 46664—and he was sentenced to life in prison. They gave him that number to say, “You’re not a person, you’re a prisoner; you don’t have a name, you’re a number; you’re alone here in a cell, you’re going to die alone here, and your voice will never be heard again.”

And yet if you Google “46664,” you will find, on YouTube, Bono, the singer for the Irish rock band, U2, singing to hundreds of thousands of people in concerts all over the world:

*It's a long walk, a long walk to freedom.
Freedom rises from the killing floor
No lock of iron can restrain the door
And no kind of army can win that war
It's like trying to stop the rain or steal the lion's roar.*

And then Bono wades out into the crowd, flashing trademark sunglasses and leather jacket, holding out his microphone, the crowd singing *to him* now: “**46664! 46664! 46664!!**”

In 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected the President of South Africa in the first fully representative democratic election in that country's history.

Friendship and music—that's what tyrants fear most:
*Freedom rises from the killing floor
No lock of iron can restrain the door
And no kind of army can win that war
It's like trying to stop the rain or steal the lion's roar.*

Friendship and music. Still don't believe me?

Mu Isamaa On Minu Arm (Translated from the Estonian: “*My Country Is My Love*”)

That's what they were singing in the “Singing Revolution” when the Baltic country Estonia broke free from the Soviet Union 29 years ago.

Estonia has a tradition, dating back to 1869, of national music festivals, featuring choirs with as many as 100,000 singers. For the 1947 song festival—the first under Soviet rule—the composer Gustav Ernesaks set an old poem, *Mu Isamaa On Minu Arm (My Country Is My Love)*, to music. The choir sang it, and it quickly became the unofficial national anthem of Estonia. In June 1988, 100,000 Estonians gathered for five straight nights to sing *My Country is My Love* and other protest songs until daybreak.

In 1991, Estonia achieved its independence. It was indeed a long walk to freedom—over 40 years—but Estonia got there: through friendship and music.

What tyrants want to do is isolate and silence—that's why they put Mandela in jail: to isolate him and silence him. And this is true of all tyrannies, not just political tyrannies but the the tyranny of the majority, of public opinion, of social prejudice, the tyranny of one human being over another, the tyranny of ignorance, hatred and fear. No matter what kind of tyranny we're talking about, its m.o. is always the same: isolate and silence.

In one way or another, it's what every abuser does to his or her victim: the abuser says to the victim: “Nobody cares, and nobody cares about you, and if you say anything, nobody will believe you, they'll blame you, laugh at you, mock you, scorn you.

Isolate and silence—it's what tyranny always wants to do. It's what gaslighting—making the victim think that *they're* the crazy one—does. Gaslighting says: “what you think you're seeing and hearing is *not* what you're seeing and hearing; what you think you're feeling and thinking is *not* what you're feeling and thinking; who you think you are and what you think you might be is not who you really are—you don't count, you're nothing, you're worse than nothing, you're this or that (so many hateful words used here), you're crazy, you're sick, you're not even human.

And let's not kid ourselves: this kind of abuse has power. It has destroyed human lives, and when it gets inside you, which it always does to some degree, it can lead to the worst kind of destructive and self-destructive behavior.

But it is no match for friendship and music. Because in friendship we know that we're not alone, and in singing we find our common voice. Friendship and music: no tyranny can withstand them—it's only a matter of time—*It's like trying to stop the rain or steal the lion's roar.*

Don't believe me?

*I don't want to see my brothers, kicked into the dust no more.
I don't want to see my sisters, having to give in no more.
Their loving called a sin no more, no more, no more.*

*The Stonewall Nation's, gonna have its liberation.
Wait and see, just wait and see.
For together we can rise above it, we're gonna be ourselves and love it.
The Stonewall Nation is gonna be free.*

*March along. We're all gonna sing our song.
Take me by the hand, we're gonna build our promise land,
Right now, right now.*

That song—*Stonewall Nation*—was written almost 50 years ago. This year, 50 years later, about 5 million people gathered in New York for *Stonewall50-WorldPride 2019*—to celebrate the Stonewall uprising as one of the first and most important steps towards LGBTQ freedom.

It's a long walk to freedom: But friendship and music are the way—as they are God's way to us.

How does God come to us? Not in wrath:

*How can I give you up?
My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy;
for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.*

How does God come to us? Not in power and pomp and circumstance.

*though he was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited, but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form, he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

How does God come to us? In friendship, as one of us, ready to suffer and die for us, so that we may, with one voice, sing the song of heaven and earth, and the tyranny of death may be vanquished once and for all.

And these days you can see, you can hear—you can feel—the power of friendship and music in Dayton. To cite only a few of the closest and most recent examples: On Friday night, there was bluegrass at Levitt Pavilion and Rhythm and Blues at the Riverscape Park. On Saturday, there was a DaytonStrong Community Workout on South Patterson, and African American Cultural Festival at Island Metro Park, and at Riverscape, Yoga in the Park, with more than 300 women men and children of all ages, shapes, sizes, and degrees of limberness on their mats doing yoga to the theme of "We're all in this together."

We need such things, I think; I know I do. We need them because the threat of tyranny is very much with us. Don't believe me?

Get in your car, and drive up Riverside Drive to Shoup Mill Road, and you can see the effects of the the tornadoes,—and you can't help but feel—at least a little—the tyranny of that destruction, the tyranny of weariness and resignation. Or go to a public place these days, and you can't help but feel at least a little twinge of it, even if you don't want to acknowledge it, the tyranny of hesitation and fear, the tyranny of wariness and distrust. What all tyranny—including the tyranny of violence—wants to do is isolate and silence.

So the efforts to come together in friendship and music that I mentioned—and many, many, many more like them— . . . well, I find them inspiring. And I have to say, with gratitude, that I find the efforts of civic friendship on the part of this congregation, equally inspiring.

Again, to cite only a few of the more recent examples. After the tornadoes, The Montgomery County Health Department Vital Statistics Office called us up asking if we would help them help residents receive new birth certificates for the ones that were lost in the tornadoes.

They asked us for \$5000; we ended up donating \$8000, in addition to countless volunteer hours to help people get identification to begin to rebuild their lives . One family—a father and mother and six children—needed eight birth certificates from Michigan—and they got them.

This past Tuesday, representatives from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and our Presbytery, including our member Sally Dyer, and other members, opened up our church as a “Time Out Haven,” that is, a place, where people—anyone—affected by both the natural and human caused disasters could have some time for conversation, reflection, and prayer—in other words, a place to find a listening ear and a friend. Two immediate family members of one of the shooting victims came and found friends who listened to them, hugged them, supported them, and prayed with them, and they ended their time out here together, praying at our Prayer Wall.

And then this past Thursday night, a number of our members took themselves and several large brown tubs of ice cream along with chocolate syrup, sprinkles, and all the many other necessary toppings, to one of our two partner schools, Eastmont Elementary, to serve parents, children, and teachers for what has now become our annual, back-to-school ice cream social. Most of the kids dressed up, and one of them said, “This is my favorite outfit and I just had to wear it for the ice cream social.”

As I said these are only a few of the recent acts of civic friendship on the part of this congregation. And we do them because God has come to us—and continues to come to us—in friendship.

And as for music? Well, this is *Westminster*—we *always* have music. And today we have the music and the friendship of The Dayton Gay Men's Chorus.

It's a long walk to freedom. But we're gonna get there. In music and in friendship, we're gonna get there.

Thank you, Dayton Gay Men's Chorus, for being with us today.

And for music and friendship, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.