

Opening Remarks

Hello, I'm Jonathan Mason and I've been a member at the church for the better part of the last 15 years, broken by one stint in Boston.

One of the special times that I've had in this congregation is as the sun is streaming in the windows to hear us sing one of the beautiful hymns for our song book. In these special moments, all my life worries drop away, and the beautiful chords of the piano or organ combine with our community singing, with words that are thought provoking and I end those services with a profound peace that I didn't have when I started.

We've had services before where we focused on singing multiple hymns, but I came up with an idea a couple of months ago to take some of the songs that we sing most often and research the history of those hymns. So rather than being one unified sermon or talk today, there will be five short talks before each hymn.

“Hymn 35 - Bravest Fire”

Ten Years ago I did a deep dive on the Apostle Paul. Paul was a significant historical figure as the most effective missionary for Christianity in the first century. In reading the core letters of Paul (only some in the New Testament are considered authentic), we are reaching back to oldest parts of the New Testament, from AD 50 to AD 60.

Paul was described as “a man of small stature with eyebrows that met in the middle”. He is an important figure because of all the Christian communities that he started in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, in modern day Turkey and Greece. More important than his ministry was his success in allowing Gentiles, non-Jews, into Christianity without a requirement to obey the Jewish dietary laws, an ironic legacy considering that Paul himself was a devout Jew. This started the movement of Christianity away from Judaism into a separate religion.

The song “In Search of Bravest Fire” is a summary of Paul’s famous description of Love in First Corinthians. First Corinthians was a letter from Paul to his congregation on the Isle of Corinth, answering questions that they had about theology. In it in a famous passage that is often heard at weddings, Paul talks about the importance of love. It is one of the great passages of Western literature from the classical period. The core of the passage is as follows:

“I may speak in tongues of men or of angels, but if I am without love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. I may have the gift of prophesy, and know every hidden truth; I may have faith strong enough to move mountains; but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may dole out all I possess, or even give my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I am none the better.

Love is patient; love is kind and envies no one. There is nothing that love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope and its endurance.

There are three things that last for ever; faith, hope and love, but the greatest of them all is love. “

With this passage that still resonates with us today 2,000 years after it was written, we have the start of social action that extends beyond the family. For if love is so important, then love can’t only end with the family, but necessarily extended into the Christian communities of the time.

Christian communities were the first big group in the Roman Empire to try to develop an economic safety net for their members, caring for those with no food, who were sick. All kind hearted liberals should view this letter as an important step forward on our social justice journey. You’ll see that “In Search of Bravest Fire” adapts these lyrics to a Scottish song called O Waly Waly that itself dates to 1730.

Now let’s sing “Hymn 35, Bravest Fire”

Amazing Grace

Amazing Grace is one of the most popular hymns or folk songs in the whole world. It is played 10 million times a year. It was written as a New Year's reading in Olney, Buckinghamshire on New Year's Day 1773 by John Newton.

Newton is a great example of an intriguing character in world history. He enlisted or was impressed into the Royal Navy and earned a reputation for imaginative profanity in a profession where profanity was routine. After being enslaved in Africa on a plantation in Sierra Leone, rather than being repulsed by the experience, he entered into a new career of slave trading. He identified a storm in 1748 as being the start of a religious conversion, but he did not end his trading career until 1755. For the last thirty years of his life, he became a hymn writer at his parish in England. Late in his life in the 1780s, he became of a vocal supporter of the abolitionist movement in England that banned slavery in 1808.

There have been numerous articles and books on this hymn, not surprising given its popularity. A mainstream interpretation is the hymn is autobiographical, with Newton celebrating his new period of being a devout Christian. Another more questionable interpretation links the hymn to the abolitionist movement. There is also a theory that Newton wrote it for Samuels Cowpers his collaborator in hymn writing, who struggled with mental illness. As a Unitarian, I like the words because it tells me that while we're imperfect human beings, every day is a new day with new opportunities and choices to be made. In other words, I view it as a song of hope. I also remember when I was 12 years old, hearing Judy Collins singing it and thinking that it was a stunning, beautiful hymn. One of arguments for the hymn's popularity is its simplicity, outside of the word Amazing, the hymn is composed of all one syllable words.

While the words were penned in 1772-73, the music that we sing today did not join up with the hymn until 1835 and came from a tune called "New Britain"; William Walker developed the arrangement.

But even if it's unlikely that Newton wrote the song for the abolitionists, the song was adopted by slaves in the US South and Caribbean in the 19th century and scholars know that the last verse was not written by Newton and believe that it arose from slaves adding this verse and part of one of the songs that got them through life,

Now let's sing Amazing Grace.

Tis a Gift to be Simple

This popular hymn was penned in the 1840's by a Shaker named Joseph Brackett who was based in Sabbathday Lake, Maine which is the site today of the last Shaker community in the United States.

The Shakers got their name as shortened form of Shaking Quakers. They were a small sect that believed in free grace, freedom from sin, and the coming end of the world. Their matriarch, Mother Ann Lee, asked Americans "live together, every day, as though it was the last day you had to live in this world." The Shakers reached their highest numbers from 1800-1850. One boost came from the Dark Day on May 19, 1780. Forest fires on that day caused the whole day to stay dark over New England and New York. Frightened citizens went to church to pray, many believing that the end of the world had come. The Shakers got a boost from this event. The second reason for the success of the Shakers and other Utopian communities came from economic panics that periodically hit the economies of America and Britain. In these panics, jobs and savings were wiped out, sort of 2009 on steroids. Shaker communities offered a self sufficient alternative to making a living individually and was one of many Utopian communities that flourished in this period. If you go on the website for the Shakers, their buildings and furniture are works of art in how simple and well constructed they are.

Shakers were celibate and emphasised dancing as a group activity and would dance for hours, men and women separate. As a result, thousands of songs were written by Shakers for their community dances. "Tis a Gift to be Simple" is the most famous of these. Brackett wrote the song for dancing. Its lyrics refer to the dancing motions of bending, bowing and turning that were meant to be done in unison. It is said that Brackett had his coattails flying as he sang and jumped at the very exact time as other members, jumping round without moving out of his spot. Because of all the hours of practice, a Shaker dance would have been impressive to watch and in fact townspeople would picnic outside of Shaker halls to watch them dance.

The term gift was an important one for the Shakers. It meant a spiritual offering from God that could take the form of faith, prophesy, skill or a sense of divine direction.

When we sing the song, let's try to transport ourselves back in time and imagine how the Shakers would have sung and danced to this.

My Life Flows on in Endless Song

There's a debate about the origin of this song. I've heard that it arose out of the abolitionist movement but I can't find any evidence of this. In our hymnal, it says it's a Quaker song but my research indicates that it first appeared in print in 1868, written by American Baptist minister Robert Wadsworth Lowry. It did become one of the most popular songs in the Quaker repertoire in the 20th century.

Verse #1 is the original, but Verse #2 was originally much more Christian, but the Unitarian verse is more common now because of its entry into the folk song movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Verse #3 is my personal favorite and was added by Doris Plenn in 1950. This in turn became one of Pete Seeger's most sung folk songs. Pete Seeger was a Unitarian Universalist and prominent social activist and folk singer who had an amazing career from the 1930s to 2013, who died earlier this year. Seeger loved the Doris Plenn verse, specifically the phrase "when friends by shame are undefiled, how can I keep from singing". Seeger was blacklisted during the McCarthy era and thought this phrase summed his pride at those who stood up to McCarthy.

Seeger's tour of Australia in 1963 was influential in stoking up the folk song revival in Australasia. Rafters may well be a legacy of that revival.

Before we sing, let me quote Pete Seeger on his Unitarian theology

"I feel most spiritual when I'm out in the woods. I feel part of [nature](#). Or looking up at the stars. [I used to say] I was an atheist. Now I say, it's all according to your definition of God. According to my definition of God, I'm not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes I'm looking at God. Whenever I'm listening to something I'm listening to God." ¹

Now let's sing My Life Flows on in Endless Song.

Spirit of Life

We'll do two songs from Carolyn McDade, who started with the UU's but has since moved on to focus on women's groups.

I'll explain more about Carolyn's life before the other song "Let's Build a Land".

The origin of "Spirit of Life" dates from the early 1980's, when McDade felt so discouraged after a meeting to change US policy in Central America that she said 'I feel like a piece of dried cardboard that has lain in the attic for years. Just open wide the door, and I'll be dust.' She went over a woman friends house, shared her thoughts and the friend was so good at active listening that at the end of the evening McDade felt better, went home, went to her piano and composed "Spirit of Life" in honour of the friendship and support that women give each other.

It caught on like wildfire at UU congregations and has become our "Amazing Grace".

UU congregations have tried to add verses to it, but the composer would prefer that we leave it as it is, encouraging others to do new songs if they have thoughts to share.

Now for "Spirit of Life"

We'll Build a Land

This is the second song from Caroly McDade with help from Barbara Zanotti. Its lyrics are from the Old Testament; the readings from which they are taken are on 582 and 588 of the responsive readings. The song arose from a 1979 Disarmament Conference in New York City and it is meant to be an antiwar song.

Now let me tell you about Carolyn McDade. She is from the United States and is now close to 80 years old and lives in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. She married an academic but ended up divorced, in her late 30s and had to raise three children on her own. She definitely chose the less travelled path, building a career in social activism and women's issues. One of the reasons that she wrote songs is because of the relative lack of songs written by women in the UU hymn book of the time.

Carolyn developed the first Water Ceremony for the UU church back in the 80s. In the original version, it was meant to unite women who were working in their local communities on different causes in a ceremony where each would be blessed with the common water from the group.

Carolyn designs her songs with notes and harmonies that sound beautiful for choirs made up of older women. While she says that men and younger women will often not like her songs, I think that her hymns have broad appeal to UU's of both genders and all ages.

For the last 20 years, Carolyn has led women's conferences in Canada that combine singing with discussions about women's issues. Based on the commentaries of attendees, these are conferences that have changed women's lives.

And now let's sing "We'll Build a Land".