# Music Hath Charms

A sermon by Jackie Clement
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Hello, friends. It's good to see you for it's been a tough summer. I told the musicians that this would be a light-hearted and upbeat service, but I didn't know then how the summer would unfold. It's been a tough summer. So many people have lost their lives to gun violence. So many of the stories in the news sit upon our hearts like stones. Not a day gone by without the heartache of loss for some mother, some father, some friend or cousin or daughter. We stand in witness as life after life is taken by fear, by misunderstanding, by accident, by mental illness, by rage. I don't know about you, but I often feel as if I stand not only in witness, but in *helpless* witness, not knowing where to turn with all the loss, afraid to feel the sheer force of it, a force which can either crush or numb. Where do we go with it all?

I hope this community has been one of the places where you can bring all that weighs upon your heart—that, here, we find others who also see the pain in the world, people who can meet us with whatever concerns we carry and stand with us. For here, in loving community, is where the holy resides. By whatever name you know it—God, goddess, community, love, the sacred web of all existence—the holy is found where good people meet and offer strength to one another. It is in those who weep that we see hope for the world. It is in witnessing acts of courage or love or reconciliation where we can see the glimmers that take us that next bit of the way toward healing, toward being able to hold all that is.

And there have been acts of courage and love and grace in this summer of tears. The US military announced that transgendered people will be able to serve openly. Members of the House of Representatives staged a sit in demanding a debate on sensible gun control legislation. And on the night of the shooting at the Orlando Pulse nightclub the Broadway show Hamilton won 11 Tony Awards. You might think Broadway laughably removed from the real world we see all around us, but a rap musical about America's founding fathers portrayed by actors of color challenges preconceptions about life in this country in ways that might just help change some of the reasons people have died this summer. Acts of love and courage and art change hearts and minds and maybe someday actions, too.

One of the acts of courage and love I witnessed this summer was at our annual UU General Assembly in Columbus, OH. The Westboro Baptist Church, known for their messages of hate and exclusion, decided to protest GA this year carrying the obligatory "God hates you" signs. In response, UUs wearing angel wings 10 feet high lined the sidewalk between the protesters and the convention center. Behind them, 200 UUs gathered to sing hymns. The protest was short lived. As Charles Behrens from First Unitarian in Orlando, FL said, "I'm not surprised that just singing songs about love ran them off. They are bullies and they don't stand up to people just expressing love."

Not only on the Columbus sidewalk but beforehand in the convention center the UU counter protesters prepared by singing together. When I breathe in, I breathe in peace. When I breathe out, I breathe out love. I've got peace like a river flowing in my soul. Songs we sing right here every Sunday although *Enter, Rejoice and Come In* was changed to "Enter, Rejoice and Go Out" to acknowledge that we need to take our values and our voices out into the public square. Singing together set the common intention for this group of protesters, just as it has for countless others.

It is a time tried tradition, songs of protest and love in response to injustice and hatred. Ysaye Maria Barnwell, one of the founders of Sweet Honey in the Rock, teaches a workshop on singing in the African American tradition. She says that singing together was an important element of protest from the spirituals of slavery to the anthems of the Civil Rights movement. It is an element largely lost in today's protest movements where songs have been replaced by simple chants. To sing together you had to come together to learn the songs and thus learn each other's hearts. Community organizer Marshall Ganz concurs. He says that social media is great at mobilizing people for protest movements, but simplistic chants of "hey, hey, ho, ho, Goldman-Sachs has got to go" don't build relationship. As Ganz says, it is really relationship rather than symbolic acts of protest that moves the work forward. Our second reading this morning illustrates how relationships can be build across divisions by sharing a song. Singing together for social justice brings us into community and builds the ground on which the change happens. It lessens the barriers. It forms common intent. It embodies the message of justice. It inspires.

Singing together in any context has many benefits including. Earlier this summer, Gary Gletty, Director of our Adult Choir, sent out a link to a blog post listing the benefits of singing in a choir. From the Front of the Choir[1] blogger, Chris Rowbury, lists the following 7 benefits:

1. Singing in a choir leaves no space in your thoughts for other problems. Concentrating on lyrics and pitch and rhythm leaves no room for outside cares. They are set aside for a time.
2. The sense of belonging and togetherness is developed. As Barnwell and Ganz and many others affirm, singing together builds relationship and social inclusion.
3. Singing is good for your physical wellbeing. In addition to lowering anxiety, singing together offers benefits to heart, lungs and muscles from breathing slowly and rhythmically, from the stretching and maintaining good posture. A study in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* even found that singing together synchronizes the heart beats of choir members. It says "Choir singing is known to promote wellbeing. One reason for this may be that singing demands a slower than normal respiration, which may in turn affect heart activity. Coupling of heart rate … to respiration… has a subjective as well as a biologically soothing effect, and it is beneficial for cardiovascular function." In other words, singing together is good for your heart.
4. As advocates of social change know, there is strength in numbers. Singing together assures us that we are not alone.
5. Singing together allows for the public expression of emotion. There are few places in the world that allow for the display of shared emotion other sports stadiums. Singing together

[1] http://blog.chrisrowbury.com/2016/07/why-singing-together-is-great-healer.html

allows for the expression of a wide variety of emotions. Last week, John and I attended the Northeast Choral Festival at the UU Camp in Ferry Beach, ME. As we were preparing one particularly pastoral piece the director was trying to get us to put some expression into it. He said that if we if we felt the meaning of the words and held the right intention it wouldn't even matter if we sang it out loud. The audience would understand what we were trying to say anyway. At first I was dubious of this claim, but the more I think about it the more I agree. There is more nonverbal communication in intention and the attendant facial expression and body language than we sometimes think. But back to our list.

6. Rowbury continues saying that singing together is a reminder that people are basically good. In tough times it can be easy to forget all the love in the world, but singing together is a team endeavor. Everyone is needed, every voice is needed, to reach the goal together. It reminds us that good is there around us.
7. And finally, there's always a song to fit the bill. No matter what is going on in your life, there's a song for it. Being able to express whatever it is that is alive for you and to do it in the company of others is a healing thing.

Lots of other people have lots of other lists of benefits from singing, but I would add one more to any list – perfection is not an option. One of the greatest things we can learn from singing together is that we are human, and that perfection is not a human quality. Expecting perfection from ourselves or others is an unrealistic and disappointing exercise. Redefine perfect to mean "good enough" and you will relieve a great deal of unhappiness.

So these are some of the benefits of singing together. Singing alone has its benefits, as well, but singing in groups offers even more. We don't often find places to sing together in today's society. Unless you belong to a choir the opportunities are few. It used to be that singing together was a form of community entertainment, but less so now than it once was.

One of the events of our Choral Fest week at Ferry Beach was singing around the campfire. Someone suggested it should be held later in the evening, after dark, so we could enjoy the fire more fully. But then we wouldn't be able to see the sheets of lyrics, someone else pointed out. A third voice added that once upon a time you didn't need lyric sheets for a campfire sing-along because everyone knew the words or you learned them as you went because surely there would be another such sing-along soon. Campfire sing-alongs are largely a thing of the past.

Once upon a time my mother carried in her purse a lyric sheet of old standards, a souvenir from the Dew Drop Inn. She used it to keep the family entertained and well behaved on car rides, but I imagine the reason the Dew Drop Inn printed such sheets in the first place was that they had regular sing-along nights for their patrons where Daisy gave her answer true and a fellow met a girl just like the girl that married dear old dad.

And once upon a time, Hamilton, that musical that won 11 Tony Awards, wouldn't have relied on $500 a seat tickets to stay in business but would have been supported by the sales of thousands or millions of copies of sheet music for people to sing around the piano at home.

Today music is much more likely to be enjoyed (consumed if you will) electronically and alone. Music is turning into a commodity and singing into an increasingly solo pursuit. So where do you sing with other people if you are not gifted enough or interested enough to be in a choir? Church. That's where. Embrace the hymn singing. It's good for you.

In our first reading, the man with the good voice failed to heed the biblical injunction to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. This may not be how your theology would describe why we sing in church, but surely making a joyful noise is part of our common life because here we should be able to bring our full selves. Joy and pain, anger and love, laughter and tears. We bring it all here. We sing it all here. We hold it all in silence here.

Both song and silence express things we cannot express in words, not only about our own lives and the human condition, but also about mystery and spirit. When we have no words for the transcendent music becomes our language. We sing because we seek transcendence.

A church of my acquaintance took a survey about what people liked and didn't like in worship. The most common complaint was too much singing—too many hymns, too many of the same hymns, too many new hymns. Too much singing. But we sing because we seek transcendence. And relationship. And healing. And stronger hearts.

One last story from Ferry Beach. Each year, Choral Fest shares the camp with the gay men's conference, Gayla. It has been a tenuous relationship building slowly over the nine years of Choral Fest. You see, Gayla had had the beach to themselves for decades. For the brothers, many of them not UU and many of them not out in their home communities, Gayla was the one safe space they had. And here we came with our hetero couples and unknown judgments and choral festival energy. That first year was a big unknown.

One of the sacred rites of Gayla is a time of remembrance for all the brothers who have died. A banner naming all who came before is carried in procession on a slow walk from the pine grove through the length of the camp and to the beach. Beginning in the years of the AIDS crisis it is a somber, touching, heart wrenching and healing ritual. That first year, they asked us to suspend choir practice while they walked, and so we spontaneously lined the route in silent tribute as they passed. We still line the route, but now we sing as they pass because singing together is good for your heart.

We sing because we seek courage and inspiration for the work ahead. We sing to know that we are not alone, to build community and relationship. We sing to express what words cannot express. We sing because we seek healing and transcendence. We sing because it is good for our hearts.

The words of the poet Gregory Orr

> This is what was bequeathed us:
> This earth the beloved left
> And, leaving,
> Left to us.

No other world
But this one:
Willows and the river
And the factory
With its black smokestacks.

No other shore, only this bank
On which the living gather.

No meaning but what we find here.
No purpose but what we make.

That, and the beloved's clear instructions:
Turn me into song; sing me awake.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.