

Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church

Just Keep on Singing*

Ephesians 5:15-20

August 26, 2018

- The Lesson -

“So be careful to live your life wisely, not foolishly. Take advantage of every opportunity because these are evil times. Because of this, don’t be ignorant, but understand the Lord’s will. Don’t get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

There is one thing that makes the letter to the Ephesians quite strange. And that is the matter of authorship. Yes, biblical scholars are not sure who wrote it. The tradition points to the apostle Paul. If one reads the accounts on the Paul’s journeys as recorded in the book of Acts, it is evident that the Christian presence in Ephesus was one Paul knew and kept close to his heart. There is also some references in the letter that, if Paul authored it, suggests that he would have written the letter while in prison. There is a maturity in the theology of the letter, and a focus on the long-term ministry and witness of the Church, that suggests this would have been a letter written in the latter part of Paul’s life.

The latter – the maturity in theology and the focus on the church’s long-term ministry – is the same reason quoted by some Biblical scholars to suggest this letter was attributed to Paul after his death. Some would even suggest that this was a letter sent out posthumously – finished by some of his disciples or by Paul’s scribe. But what seems quite interesting about the discussion of the authorship of the letter to the Ephesians in the hallowed halls of schools of theological and biblical scholarship is that what ends up capturing the intention and the imagination of these scholars is the quality of language of the letter. Many scholars are still caught by what seems to be a lower quality of the Greek in the letter of the Ephesians, say as opposed to that of the letters to the Romans or to the Philippians.

The writers of the New Testament wrote their gospels, epistles, hagiographies and revelations in koine Greek. Koine was the lingua franca of the Roman Empire – that folk Greek that was used in daily interactions. It was not the Greek used by the intelligentsia or in the high offices of government. A people’s Greek. To more effectively share what was then the new message of the followers of Jesus the writers of the New Testament relied on the common tongue.

The capacity to be more effective in the sharing of information through a lingua franca, however, is quickly coupled by the purveyor’s own self. Surely, we can argue that it is history, and knowledge, and philosophical reflections what was shared through these writings. There is, however, a point of view. There was never an intention, nor should there be an expectation, of objectivity in the writing of these Scriptures, and most certainly not in our reading of it. For the biblical narrative is in its essentiality and its functionality a collection of stories of the struggle of humankind in its relationship with

God and of God's pursuit of redemption for humankind and creation because God is love.

For me, Maya Angelou's magnificence is found in her ability to write about the historical and current plight of Black Americans and women of color in a voice and cadence that is unmistakably hers. In her poetry, autobiographies and essays one can read her undeniable commitment to the liberation of African Americans through civil rights advocacy, community presence, and African connections. Her manifold life experiences – personal, social, political, artistic – can be identified readily in her writings. And, although she is most certainly writing about herself, one can sense there is much more than her only self in what she is expressing:

**You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.**

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
**Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.**

**Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?**

**Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise***

It is as if Doctor Angelou cannot help herself but to write unequivocally about herself while lending her voice to some who in her generation and in our past could have and should have shared a similar history – although never the same story. I believe that Dr. Angelou (and for that matter Paul, the apostle) never intended for their writings – such a personal expression of their life and faith committed surely to the wellbeing of those with whom they shared a history – to find resonance and significance beyond their generation and their time.

The end, surely, does not justify the means. But in this case – in the case of sharing that which resonates true and eternal so profoundly in ones being, even as it might seem foolishness – the means – a common language – necessarily fall short of the intended end. Language, even if it is one that is understood by most everyone, cannot fully expound what is the deepest reality of each of our beings. And so, Paul's advice:

- Imitate God, living your life with love
- Be light. The product of actions in the light are goodness, justice and truth
- Do not be ignorant, but discern what is the will of God

- Be filled with the Spirit by:
 - o Speaking to each other in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs

Curious choice of methods of conversation. A psalm is a poetic or musical expression of worship, confession or lamentation. A hymn is a song that teaches a story or a religious principle related to God. A spiritual song is a spontaneous expression of joy or thanksgiving. But each of those are the expression of an individual by which that individual invites the community to share in their new-found conviction, knowledge, joy, praise, sorrow or confession. One would use a language that would be common for the whole community. But the words and the delivery of that song, or poem, or essay, or autobiography, or letter will be in the unequivocal voice of the one while witnessing to the struggle of the many in the community.

And that is where Maya Angelou and Paul were magnificent. Staying true to their lives experiences and the communities they inhabited and loved they kept on writing out of the depths of themselves. And today we are encouraged as followers of Jesus to see the individual and the communal of the writings of these great humans being and do just the same – “be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts.” Out of the depths of who you are, challenged by our shared history and your own story. Be bold and brave. Tell your story.

Just keep on signing. Just keep on singing.

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. Amaury Tañón-Santos (Synod Networker of the Synod of the Northeast) to the Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church (Albany Presbytery). The sermon is based on the lesson from Ephesians 5:15-20 (Year B, 20th Sunday of Ordinary Time) and on Maya Angalou’s “Still I Rise” (the theme chosen by RPC).