

Sometimes God speaks to me through music, through songs. The last two weeks I have been singing over and over the chorus of a song. Does that ever happen to you? This chorus from a children's song, goes like this:

All God's critters got a place in the choir .
Some sing low, some sing higher.
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire,
And some just clap their hands,
or paws or anything they got now!

Over the years, I have learned to pay attention to songs when this happens, because sometimes God is trying to tell me something. If this is the song, what is the message?

All God's critters - all
Different voices are good
Some sing better in crowds - the starlings on the telephone wire
Some can't sing, but they can clap

Inclusion and diversity
How are people excluded?

Isaiah

Isaiah names one. Geography. Birth place.

We know that Isaiah was a great prophet. We know that the words he spoke were true. But in his life time there were many things that he said that people thought were ridiculous! Today's reading is one of them.

When Israel was settled, the tribes who settled in the north were Zebulun, Naphtali, Asher and Issachar.

In the late eighth century before zero, the Assyrian King conquered much of the northern territory of Israel and annexed the regions known as Naphtali and Zebulun to the Assyrian Empire. The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali suffered under the vicious Assyrians. What was worse, Zebulun and Naphtali were despised by their cousins in Jerusalem.

This area was generally referred to as the "galil" meaning district, and later came to be named Galilee. It was called "Galilee of the nations or the gentiles", because so many foreigners lived there. It was "border" land where the Jews shared the land with foreigners of other speeches and cultures. What Isaiah called "the way of the sea" was the road that lead from Syria to the Mediterranean sea. It was used by the trade caravans and the conquering armies. How could that road that had brought them defeat and oppression, how could that become a place of joy and freedom? Isaiah is pointing to territories regarded by his Jerusalem culture as distant, unsophisticated, irrelevant, or even a sign of Israel's shame in defeat. For Isaiah to say they would be made glorious would have seemed ridiculous to those of the Jerusalem culture.

Isaiah said, These are dark places - the political darkness Assyrian occupation! Religious darkness of being at a great distance from the center of religion in Jerusalem in the south. Everyday darkness of suffering

Yet Isaiah said, "God's light will shine here. It will be glorious. And - That light will bring hope and freedom from oppression."

Have you ever been excluded, told that "you can't sing in the choir" because of where you come from? part of the city? e.g. "the north end", particular school? country?

What is the place that you might say to yourself, "God's light will never shine there!" People from there "can't sing in our choir"?

For those to be confirmed and received, are you ready to take your place in the choir? Are you willing to believe that God's light will shine in you, no matter what other people might think about where you come from? That God's light might shine, no matter how dark it may look where you are now or may be in the future?

It's God's choir. God is the choir director. And
"All God's critters got a place in the choir."

Corinthians

Something is wrong in the choir! What is happening in the critter choir if Paul has to write this letter?

Some members of the choir seem to have forgotten whose choir it is! Choir members are lining up behind Paul, Apollos, Peter as their leader. They appear to be arguing about who is the greatest leader. So Paul writes, "Arguing over who you follow is foolish! Even if we baptized you, you don't follow us, you follow Jesus - you don't believe in us, you believe in Jesus! Peter, Apollos or Paul did not die for your sins! Jesus did that. So let's get this critter choir singing the same words!" The words that tell of the one we really follow. Jesus is the Son of God. He died for our sins and gave us the opportunity for forgiveness. He rose from the dead and gives us the opportunity of eternal life with him. His Holy Spirit is a gift to strengthen us for the life of discipleship.

Sometimes we try to exclude people because of leadership. Paul reminds us clearly that Jesus is the one we follow. The apostles' role was to bring people to Jesus. They each had different personalities, different leadership styles. Some folks were more attracted to one than the other. We are no different today. Some of you come to St. Paul's church because it's a family heritage. But some come because they like Dr. Friesen's preaching; others because they like his leadership style. To return to the critter choir, "choir directors", parish clergy, bishops of the church, do have different styles of leadership, different ways of teaching. But they can never forget that it is Christ who is the overall director of the critter choir.

Matthew- wants to make sure that his readers figure out that the light in the darkness, the glory of God, is Jesus Christ! Matthew tells us that when John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee. Matthew then quotes the verses from Isaiah that we heard earlier this morning about the light that shines in the darkness. Then he says Jesus began His preaching mission in Galilee - the place where all the "outsiders" lived! It is now, even more than in the time of Isaiah, the land of the gentiles. It has been since been ruled by Babylonians, Persians, Macedonians, and by Egypt and Syria. It was known for its mixed population variety of cultures and beliefs. Matthew makes plain that the first movement of Jesus in ministry was related to the gentiles, so that the universal scope of the gospel is explicit right from the outset of Jesus' work. Some folks thought that Jesus was only the Messiah /Saviour for God's chosen people, Israel. They wanted to exclude folks from God's choir because they were different from themselves. Matthew wants to make clear that Jesus is the Son of God for the whole world. Here is the one who will change the world!

Then Jesus begins calling others to come with him and share the mission - the mission to let God's light shine in the darkness, to transform daily life from misery to glory, to recruit members for the critter choir!.

Ministry Sunday - to recognize the ministries we exercise - teachers, health care professionals, parents, business people and all kinds of ministries by which people bring the light of Jesus Christ into the darkness of the world and transform it.

Confirmation day - to recognize that these folks are stepping forward to say publicly, "I follow Jesus Christ. I will serve Christ's' mission to bring light to God's world. I am going to bring my talents to participate in the critter choir!

Some of you may not know that all those to be confirmed are asked to write me a letter outlining why they wish to be confirmed. The letters from the group this morning told me that the chorus from the children's song wasn't just a message from God for me.

In this group this morning for confirmation and reception, you have

one who plays trombone and cello, who listens for the music of God's creation;
one who was told she could not sing in God's choir because she was not a he;
one who plays the trumpet, who values his family's part in the congregation;
one who really loved the songs at DYC, who values being part of a large group of young people all focused on Jesus Christ;
one who wants tell people about the God who is always with her;
one who is quietly building a life of prayer and Scripture reading so he will feel confident to talk about Jesus with school mates;
one who plays the trombone and the harp,
one who wants to shape his life more closely to Jesus,
one who gives and gains strength from singing in the congregation,
"singing out loud on the telephone wire!"

Today they are offering these gifts and these desires to God as they make their commitment to follow Jesus and to take up His mission to the dark places in our world. They have many gifts which they offer to the one Lord who is Lord of all.

Today, you as the congregation are asked to support them, to tell them they are welcome, to make space for them to take their place in God's choir, to give them the courage to enter God's song. I am reminding you of this, because sometimes congregations unintentionally exclude youth and new comers from taking their place. They do this by suggesting they don't know enough yet, they don't have enough experience yet, they can't contribute to the conversation because they don't understand the background yet. Don't do that!

Gather them in! Give them a place! Because

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