

Love That Makes a Difference

Psalm 138
1 Corinthians 15:1-11

February 10, 2019
Faith Community

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new form of music was born in the coalmines and cotton fields of the South. “It was a sad, soulful music sung by people who lived hard lives. It was called the Blues.

“A guide came out not long ago called, ‘How to Write the Blues.’ The author of the guide thinks that not just anyone can do it. He says that Blues is about luck. Breaking your leg while skiing in Aspen is not the blues. Losing your leg to an alligator in a Louisiana swamp is. You cannot wear a suit and sing the blues—unless you’re an 80-year old black man who’s worn it night and day for at least three weeks. Dying in a bar fight is a blues death; dying while having liposuction is not.

“No matter how tragic your life, if you own a laptop computer, you cannot sing the blues. Maybe your big ol’ mean woman done sat down on it. It doesn’t matter. It’s not the blues.

“It’s alright to sing the blues if you drive a Chevy or even a Cadillac—but forget about it if you drive a Volvo, BMW or any kind of SUV. It’d be better to just take a Greyhound bus instead, but your best bet is a southbound train.

“You have a right to sing the blues if your first name is a southern state...if you’re older than dirt...or if you shot a man in Memphis.

“However, you cannot sing the blues if you have all your own teeth, no matter how old you are, or if, when you shot that man in Memphis, it was only a flesh wound.

“Most blues songs begin with the words, ‘Woke up this morning.’ If you did not wake up this morning, you will have a hard time singing the blues.”¹

I don’t know about you, but there’s something in me that resonates with a good blues song. B. B. King gets my number every time. It’s like country music. Some folks think country music belongs at the bottom of the food chain, but I’m not so sure. There’s a reason it’s the most popular kind

¹ Lame Mango Washington, as cited in Dynamic Preaching, Vol. XVIII, No. 2, April/May/June, 2003, p. 25.

of music in the country. I read that “the lyrics of country songs deal with the dilemmas of life with a complexity not found in any other popular music.”²

Don't you love some of the titles?

“I Flushed You From the Toilet of My Heart.”

“If My Nose Were Running Money, Honey, I'd Blow It All On You.”

“Mama Get the Hammer, There's a Fly On Papa's Head.”

“You're the Reason Our Kids Are So Ugly.”

“I'm So Miserable Without You, It's Almost Like Having You Here.”

Sooner or later, a country song will get you. And it'll get you because it's so real. One of them will come along and you'll stop, listen, and realize it's not just a song; it's a story. And it's a story about you, or about someone close to you. And you'll realize that that someone understands, because they've been there too.

That's the genius of this Jesus thing. We do not serve a God who set the world spinning and then stepped back and was never heard from again. We serve a God who understands. That's because he became one of us. You can bet that when Jesus walked the earth he didn't look like so many of the portraits we see these days. If Scripture is correct that says he became like us, you can be sure that his beard was not neatly trimmed. He didn't have a robe on that was well tailored and constantly spotless. His dialect was as earthy as anyone else's, and there's a good chance he didn't smell all that good either, and may even have been a fan of country music. How else could he understand what it means to be human?

When my heart's breaking I don't want some antiseptic Jesus trying to wrap his arms around me. I want someone who'll listen, who will care, who understands because he's been there.

“President Franklin Roosevelt was weary of the mindless small talk of White House receptions. Wondering if anyone was engaging in any real conversation, he did an experiment at a White House gathering. As he shook a hand and flashed his big smile he would say, ‘I murdered my grandmother this morning.’ In response people would smile

² ‘Country Music’ [St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture](#), as found through [www.findarticles.com](#).

and say, ‘How lovely,’ or, ‘You’re doing a great job.’ The one and only exception was a foreign diplomat who responded quietly and with great dignity, ‘Mr. President, I’m sure she had it coming to her.’”³

The genius of this Jesus thing goes like this: here’s a guy who knows.

Here’s a guy who knows what it is to be misunderstood, to be betrayed and then learn how to trust again. Here’s also a guy who knows how to deal with anger in a healthy way, what grief feels like, and how to come back from a profound disappointment and hope again.

And here’s the best part: here’s a guy who can take my failure, my fear, my suspicion, the wickedness inside me that maybe no one else knows about, or that people know all too well, and work a wonder with it.

Love me.
Change me.
Love you too.

Mark Twain said the two most important words in the English language are, ‘not guilty.’ Only Jesus can say that to me. That’s because he took my place. He took upon himself what I deserved, what I had coming to me, and he paid the bill to make it right. Had he not been both human and God in the flesh he couldn’t have done that. He’d have just been another misguided nice guy that never really got it.

The apostle Paul makes a profound theological statement when he says, in today’s New Testament reading,

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day.
(1 Co. 15:3,4)

That’s all well and good, nicely academic, but then he gets personal. He lists some of the people the risen Christ appeared to, and finishes with himself because, as he puts it, he’s the least of them all and doesn’t even belong in the same ballpark with the others.

Then Christ came along and turned his life upside down, so now he says this:

³ Ben Patterson, Deepening Your Conversation With God (Minneapolis, Bethany House Publishers, 1999), 129-30.

By the grace of God I am what I am. (v.10)

‘Look at me now! And it’s a God thing!’ God took this high-powered, cutthroat professional, this nasty, hardhearted murderous guy and turned him into a passionate advocate for hope, healing, and new life.

By the grace of God I am what I am.

There’s something precious about a person who faces his or her own life with honesty, who knows how far he or she has missed the mark, who reaches out for help since no one can do it on their own, and who then reaches out to others with the same thing that made him a new person.

The psalmist shouts back,

Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. (Ps. 138:8)

Like you, back in Brighton we had a preschool for a number of years, and every Christmas and Easter season, our associate pastor or I visited the kids and shared some of the meaning of our faith with them. It can be a real challenge to do that with 3, 4, and 5 year olds.

I took a couple things with me on my turn. First of all was this. This old wind up watch is not much to look at. It’s all scratched up. The band is goofy, and it keeps lousy time. But I keep it, I told the kids, because it was my daddy’s watch. My daddy died forty eight years ago now, and when I look at this watch I don’t see what’s wrong with it; I see my dad. I think of the projects we worked on together. I think of the trip we took all the way to Benton Harbor just to get my ham radio transmitter fixed. And he wasn’t much on saying it, but I knew he loved me. That’s what this watch says to me.

Then I showed them an old, beat up cross. I told them crosses can be big, fancy and sparkly, or they can be small. The original ones weren’t pretty at all. But every time I see a cross I think of Jesus. I think of the amazing things he said and did. I think of his courage. He never let up on what he had come to do. And I think of how much he loved people, and of how he loves me. I’ve got nothing to prove to Jesus. I just let him love me.

And as I shared these with the preschool kids I thought it might be good to do the same with you. Maybe some of us have a hard time with this Christianity stuff because we had

a hard time with one or both parents or another significant person. We'll talk about the hypocrites in church, or all the church wants is our money, but if we were honest with ourselves, we'd know that's not it. Or maybe we're burdened with guilt over something we did or did not do. And I'm not going to say I understand what that feels like. Maybe I do, maybe not. I do know, however, that there's someone who loves you even with all the anger or confusion you've got stored up. There's someone who wants to take your broken heart and put wings on it, and turn you into a champion for healing and hope.

By the grace of God I am what I am.

I want you to be able to say that.