

## Songs of the People June 17, 2018

On the occasion of Dr. Ysaye Barnwell's visit to our congregation

### *Thought to Ponder at the Beginning:*

When we say, "Save the rain forest,"  
we don't mean that we cease to honor the mighty cedars or the reaching pines.  
We mean that one particular piece of a deeply sacred whole is more at risk than others,  
and that this risk, this threat, is worthy of our very bravest actions.  
So it is with black lives in this country,  
and the message that Black Lives Matter is important  
so long as this nation effectively functions as if they do not.  
– Nancy McDonald Ladd

### Opening Words

*Songs for the People*, by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Let me make the songs for the people,  
Songs for the old and young;  
Songs to stir like a battle-cry  
Wherever they are sung.

Not for the clashing of sabres,  
Nor for carnage nor for strife;  
But songs to thrill the hearts of [all]  
With more abundant life.

Let me make the songs for the weary,  
Amid life's fever and fret,  
Till hearts shall relax their tension  
And careworn brows forget.

Let me sing for little children,  
Before their footsteps stray,  
Sweet anthems of love and duty,  
To float o'er life's highway.

I would sing for the poor and aged,  
When shadows dim their sight;  
Of the bright and restful mansion,  
Where there shall be no night.

Our world, so worn and weary,  
Needs music, pure and strong,  
To hush the jangle and discords  
Of sorrow, pain, and wrong.

Music to soothe all its sorrow,  
Till War and Crime shall cease;  
And the hearts of [all] grown tender  
Girdle the world with peace.

**Reading** *The Men Who Left Were White*, by Josie Duffy (excerpts)

*(Here is a story that could be made into a song of the people ...)*

I'm not biracial. My story is both simple and untold. The bones of it, of me: I'm black, despite the skin that goes virtually translucent in the winter. Despite the thin unpredictable curls. My mom and dad are black, as are my grandparents. That's all there is.

My parents, usually liberal employers of nuance, have always been militant-clear about drawing that line. We aren't biracial.

In my family, the men who left were white. They had land the size of which a city brain like mine can't fathom. Southern men with pale skin, the kind of men whose job it was to oversee the overseer.

[The] women – my ancestors – were the opposite. Not boss of a solitary fly. Exhausted from all the work they'd done and the years of work that [lay] ahead. Cleaned and cooked and picked, squinted and bent over and limping, working, working so hard for so long that they must have been sore in places they didn't know they could be sore— their bone marrow, their blood. Nothing to show for it but the injuries. Not a hint of a thing resembling victory.

The women must have known rape was coming. Dread has a taste, you know. It must have crawled up

their throats. But by all accounts there was no fight. What would be the point? The sharp cut of a whip across your back? What a man like that wanted, he got. Before he retreated to his bed with his wife, did he instruct the slave to go back outside to where she slept?

And where she slept – was that a thin layer of straw or grass? Or was she one of the unlucky ones, stuck with just a plank of wood? "How much longer until I can die?" these women, my ancestors, must have wondered. "How many ways can one person own me?"

Even after Emancipation, slow as molasses in January, finished crawling across the finish line – even then it didn't end. Maybe then it was worse. I bet once the man doesn't own you, he might have to scare you. He might have to beat you up a little more. I don't know. I can only guess, because the only knowledge we have is in the missing spaces. Men who are missing from birth certificates, who never laid eyes on their child.

My history tells the story of white men who raped, white men who coerced, white men who had black children, and then white men who disappeared.

White supremacy remains the most powerful force in America's history, the trump card of socialization. The narrative of abandonment has been hijacked to only include black men. If you google "**white** men abandon children" you get this:

Why do the majority of black men abandon their children?  
Why do so many black men leave their kids with the mother?  
Why do people say black men abandon their children? Etc.

But there's a history of abandonment in America, a history of leaving black women and black children, and it did not start with black men.

When we talk about what slavery meant we talk about the ephemeral – what was and what ended. The details: plantation hierarchy, middle passage. We think That's it. But what it meant – what it means – is worse than all of the details. What it means is a legacy of genetic material that courses through my own veins.

This is a story about history, about identity. The way we've come to fetishize white features on black bodies is not only dangerous because of the way it reinforces the idea of white as better. For someone like me, it's complicated for an additional reason. The part of me that created those white features came

from men who would deny me if given the chance. Indiscreet men who took advantage of women and left. Men who not only abandoned their children but, in some cases, sold them. Had their own children bent over in fields for no pay. I'm a living remnant of that sexual assault. I'm a living remnant of that pain. I can see it in my thinner hair, my lighter skin, my freckles.

I think of those children, also my blood, and what it means to grow up marred by that abandonment and shame. I think of those children the same way I think of children with no fathers today. Surely we are all both prey and predator, snake and mouse. Surely our genetic material runs rife with strands of the conquered and the conqueror.

Maybe there's a thing you should know: part of identity is choice. My identity is defined in part by rejection, including my own. I am black. The people who made me are the ones who never left.

## **Reflection**

(c) Sylvia Stocker

*Let me make songs for the people*, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper wrote. Yesterday, around 100 people spent the day learning songs that came from the people. Under Ysaye Barnwell's extraordinary guidance, we learned songs from the African and African-American experience.

For decades, our guest Ysaye Barnwell has been gathering communities to sing those songs and to learn about the contexts that produced the songs. Songs from the African-American culture document the real, lived experiences of the people. We learned about the stories that produced the songs.

I love to sing, as you may know. But I don't attend one of Ysaye's workshops for the pure pleasure of singing. For me, the music provides one more way to gain some visceral feeling of what the African-American experience must have been like, what it must *be* like.

If racism is "America's original sin," as Christian activist Jim Wallis claims, then I, a white American, need ways to repent of that sin. Together, our congregation has been seeking ways to understand and address that original sin. Our Black Lives Matter banner came out of that work, and the work continues.

I don't know how it is for you. I find I need continually to attend to gaining increasing insight, because my social location as a white person in American society makes experiences of racism way too easy to ignore. I don't want to ignore those experiences. I need help. Stories help. Correctives stories like the one Josie Duffy tells of the white men in her family who abandoned their black children.

Music helps, too. The songs from yesterday's workshop help. The songs we sing today help. Music provides one more way to hear, to tell, and to understand the story.

Maybe white folks like me need another way of *singing* the story, singing *our part* of the story. Singing about the veil a culture of white supremacy casts over my eyes, making it difficult to see. Singing about feelings of shame for what my forebears wrought and for what I may unthinkingly, unknowingly perpetuate. Singing about hope and courage that help me to walk into the day today and into future days, too. Songs that push away the miasma that obscures the story of the white experience from white people. Songs that expose the wrong, damaging messages we've absorbed just by living in American culture, or the things we've said and done – or left unsaid and undone – whether wittingly or unwittingly. Songs of confusion, of yearning, of fear, of love.

I believe one of the steps to healing from America's original sin is for white people to tell their experiences, to sing their songs, to air out some of the things we carry inside. Here are a few of the songs I would sing if I knew how to make songs. They are songs of increasing understanding of what it means to be white in a world that favors whiteness, when ***I do not want to be favored.***

I would sing of riding the Boston train with my father when I was very little. As the train left my suburb and headed through city slums, I wondered why so many of the people in those poor neighborhoods had darker skin than most of the people in my town. That song would be one of confusion, but also nascent awareness.

I would sing about a childhood memory of going to play for the first time with one of the little black girls in my neighborhood and seeing a calendar on her bedroom wall that featured pictures of black families. That calendar wasn't at all like the Norman Rockwell calendars I had seen. Why did my friend need a “special” calendar? Where did she even find one?

I didn't know words like dominant or normative culture then, and I didn't understand things like white privilege and supremacy. I had little knowledge of the African American experience or cultural differences. I may not have even learned about slavery yet. But I remember feeling startled by that “special” calendar. My life and my friend's life intersected, but I had the sense that beyond that point of intersection was a whole world I didn't know about. My song would be one of both curiosity and longing for connection that I didn't know how to make happen.

I would sing a lament about the ridiculous, hurtful, disgusting messages I absorbed from the air around

me – from television, radio, newspaper, and things I heard people say; messages I am still trying to locate deep within those inner tapes that accompany me everywhere. I would include in that lament some praise, some gratitude, for people who help to set the record straight.

- For authors like Josie Duffy, Ta-Nehesi Coates, Michael Eric, Dyson, Debbie Irving, Bryan Stephenson
- for movies like *13<sup>th</sup>* or *Hidden Figures*
- for leaders like Ysaye who do what they can to shore up the bridge of understanding.

I would sing a song about unearned privileges I enjoy. Here's one: My dad served in the Army during World War II. He and my mom and oldest brother didn't have a home of their own. When Daddy got home from the war, GI Bill low-interest mortgages helped my family to buy its first home. The GI Bill provided similar low interest loans to thousands and thousands of returning soldiers, virtually all of them white. In theory, those loans were available to black soldiers, too. But, because of segregation and redlining, black soldiers were shut out of the benefit. So America funneled a heap of its wealth to white Americans. And that wealth has accrued to the inheriting generations, to people like me. My song would be a confession that white privilege lifts up regular people (as long as they are white) like my parents, like me, like all those white soldiers returning from the war.

I would sing about my awe and admiration for courage, resilience, and hope the African-American culture models for everyone. One song would feature this particular story: A couple of years ago, I visited the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. Of all the amazing exhibits, one was singular in the way it moved me. The exhibit was a lunch counter. When I sat down, I put a headset on. Then, I placed my hands on hand prints on the counter and closed my eyes, as my hands activated the exhibit. Suddenly, I was one of the black folks sitting at THE lunch counters. Insults poured through the headsets, plus the sounds of beverages, ketchup, and mustard being emptied out over my head. Someone kicked my chair – I could *feel* the kick. And then again. And again.

At the end, I staggered to my feet, tears rolling down my cheeks. Struggling to get the words out, I said to the docent standing there: “They were so brave.”

I already knew about that history. But, now I have a feeling in my body I will never forget. Fear, anger. And in the face of it all, bravery, almost beyond belief. I would sing how that kind of bravery is one of the best things America has to offer this world. My song would be one of inspiration.

I would sing of healing, maybe telling this story: Eight or nine years ago, I took a week long workshop with Ysaye at USM. All the students appeared to be white. Midway through the week, I offered to show a video I own called “Traces of the Trade, a Story of the Deep North.” The video chronicles the descendants of the largest slave trading family in history as they traced their forebears' shipping routes over the oceans, starting in Bristol, Rhode Island, then traveling to West Africa, then to Cuba. As you might imagine, members of the family took an inner sojourn as the miles piled up. They laid bare their learnings, their confusions, their feelings.

After our class watched the movie, we spent some time discussing it. Numerous students spoke up, defensively, saying, “I wasn't there. It wasn't my fault. My family wasn't even in America yet. Things are hard for me, too, you know.”

Well, I tell you. I wanted Scotty to beam me up. *Had they not heard a single thing Ysaye had taught that week?* Ysaye listened without commenting. And then she began to sing:

There's a light, there's a light in the darkness,  
and the black of the night cannot harm us.  
We will trust not to fear, for our comfort is near.  
There's a light, there's a light in the darkness.  
– Beth Neilson Chapman

Oh, how I needed to be reminded of that light in those moments! My song would be one both of faith that the light is there, somewhere, and also one of yearning for that light to shine – even a song of surrender to that light, when things are too confusing or painful or stuck for me to bear.

Those are some of my would-be songs: Songs of curiosity, confusion, lament, praise, gratitude, inspiration, confession, healing, faith, yearning.

Each of us would have our own songs ... of curiosity confusion, lament, praise, inspiration, confession, healing, faith, and yearning. Maybe other songs, too. Songs of discouragement? Fear? Hope?

What songs would you sing?

I am grateful for this church, for your willingness, even eagerness, to step out on a limb and install a Black Lives Matter banner, I am grateful for your dedication to discovering more about white supremacy and how it affects us all. May our community be a place where we can learn to hear the

songs we carry within us and where we can gain more and more courage to sing them.

Keeping things buried does not help. Staying silent does not help. Remaining unaware of realities, both past and present, does not help. What does help is to look, to listen, to try to understand in new ways, and to sing the songs that document our journey through the uncharted territory of healing and change.