

August 31, 2024 Prpr 17 “You Gotta Have Heart”

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Those of you who enjoy Broadway Musicals know there comes a moment in every musical when the characters feel discouraged, uncertain, or afraid. To help them move beyond that feeling, they sing a special kind of song; one that is usually uplifting and upbeat, with a tune so catchy you might find yourself humming it long after you leave the theater. There are many examples. In *Rogers and Hammerstein's The King and I*, *Whistle a Happy Tune* gives the new tutor Anna and her son the courage to start a new life in a different country. Likewise, it is the chirpy *My Favorite Things* from *The Sound of Music* that inspires the new governess Maria to not only do her new job, but to do it with a love for the Von Trapp children. In *Hairspray*, the song *Welcome to the 60's* helps Tracey Turnblat inspire her mother to embrace the opportunities and challenges of a new age. The powerful *Do You Hear the People Sing* from *Les Misérables* can set hearts and minds to revolution and a better life. *Defying Gravity* from one of my favorite musicals, *Wicked*, lifts Elphaba to new heights, by helping her connect her gifts to a larger purpose, one which some will decide makes her the Wicked Witch of the West. One of the most popular songs from the 1955 musical *Damn Yankees*, *You Gotta Have Heart* could be said gets to the heart of what all these songs are about.

Of course, in real life, people do not start singing songs when we need encouragement, inspiration, or a means to connect to something bigger than ourselves.....Or do they?

In 1983, long before he became a lawyer, the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, TED Talk speaker, writer, professor of law at New York University Law School, and recipient of multiple awards, Bryan Stevenson was a 23-year-old student at Harvard Law school wondering if he had made a big mistake. He was not doing well in his classes, and admitted one of the reasons he went into law is because he hadn't given much thought to what he was going to do after college graduation, and he didn't need any previous studies in law to apply to law school. The style of teaching at Harvard, combined with how unfamiliar he was with the law, and feeling disconnected from his course of study, made him wonder if he really wanted to be a lawyer. To add to his uncertainty, Bryan was participating in an internship program in Georgia that worked with prisoners on death row, and as he drove to the first of many maximum-security prisons he would visit, Bryan was anxious and worried the man he was going to visit was going to be disappointed in him.

As he describes the encounter in his book, *Just Mercy*, when Bryan met Henry, a prisoner on death row, all Bryan did was apologize for not being a lawyer. But after he told Henry an execution date had not been scheduled yet, and a lawyer would be taking his case, Henry relaxed. The two men spent the rest of that visit talking about anything and everything: family, music, what prison is like, where they are from; they laughed together, shared some emotional moments, and genuinely enjoyed each other's company. They got so lost in conversation, Bryan did not realize he had stayed a lot longer than the time allowed for a legal visit, until he heard a heavy door slam, and a guard came in the room. Bryan apologized, but the guard dismissed him and perhaps to punish Henry, was physically rough with him by putting handcuffs on too tight, roughly shackling his ankles, and shoving him toward the door. Bryan kept pleading with the guard to not be so rough, and Henry, picking up on his discomfort kept telling Bryan not to let it bother him, and to come back and see him again.

Then Henry did something unexpected. When he got in the doorway, he planted his feet to resist the guard's shoves, closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and began singing a spiritual Bryan knew from growing up in church: *I'm pressing on, the upward way, new heights I'm gaining everyday, still praying as I'm onward bound, Lord, plant my feet on Higher Ground.*

Bryan writes, Henry's song had a powerful effect on him. He received the song as a gift that changed his understanding of human potential, redemption, and hopefulness. Something in that song

resonated with Bryan, and he realized that his own attainment of Higher Ground – a term for the Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God here on earth - was connected to Henry's attainment of that same Higher Ground. In that moment, I believe Bryan found his heart for people and for practicing law.

When Bryan returned to Harvard after the internship that change of heart showed. He not only worked hard, he worked hard for a purpose, realizing he indeed wanted to be...or perhaps felt called by God to be...a lawyer because he was going to live his very Kingdom of God belief that each and every one of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done by following all the necessary protocols of the legal system to represent people the world and system have given up on. All because of a song that touched the very thing Jesus talked about in today's Gospel: his heart.

At first glance, it might seem Jesus did not think very highly of us human beings by saying so much evil stuff comes from our hearts. Like most things in the Gospels, we have to look a little deeper to get closer to what Jesus is saying. In the section of Mark's Gospel we just heard, Jesus was responding to critics who were always looking for an opportunity to discredit him. They recognized such an opportunity, when they saw some, of Jesus' disciples not following purity rules – rules that were not about hygiene but piety. The critics appear to have insinuated this meant something was wrong with Jesus, that he wasn't who he said he was.

Some scholars remind us that the purity rules in question were those of the Pharisees, and not all religious Jews followed them. Other New Testament scholars like N.T. Wright, former Bishop of Durham, reminds us that when someone is extra picky about the rules, whatever those rules are, there is probably something else going on, perhaps an attempt to control or exert power. Sometimes criticism isn't about the rules at all, but something troubling in the critic's heart, especially when rules matter more than people.

These scholars also point out Jesus did not say the rules were bad or should be ignored or thrown out. We could say through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled a lot of those rules, opening for us a new life to live into, one that has its own rules, expectations, practices and disciplines. What Jesus is most likely getting at in today's Gospel is that a person can say all the right things, follow all the rules, and do all the things they are expected to do, but if their hearts are not in it, if they don't feel connected to God and others, then something is missing. Religion – like law - is not a set of rules and practices we must follow without fail. Religion is intended to help us connect to God, to each other, to the world and our purpose in it. Like those songs from the musicals remind us, without heart -without connection to something more than just self- all those rules and practices, are empty, and in that emptiness all that nasty stuff Jesus mentioned can take root.

The heart Jesus is talking about can be difficult to clearly or simply define. Obviously, we are not talking about the literal muscle in our chests that continuously beats, pumping blood throughout our bodies. The heart Jesus is talking about is just as real, otherwise there wouldn't be all those songs in the musicals that inspire us. And all the other things in addition to music that help us experience this deep, holy connection to God, people, purpose, or place. For some people, stories can resonate deeply, helping them find meaning and purpose in life, and connection with God. For others it is seeing an eagle soar overhead, or hearing the loons cry, especially in the spring when they return from their winter grounds or listening to the wind move through the trees. The drumming of Native American songs is said to be a connection to the heartbeat of the earth, revealing this notion of heart is something we have in common.

Even though it cannot be easily defined, in today's Gospel Jesus seems to be saying this concept of heart is vital to our emotional, mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing, to our relationships, to all we do. And while most of us do not get to have a real-life musical experience like that of Bryan Stevenson, we do have opportunities to reflect on and receive the gift of sacred or holy connection. Even our calendar offers this opportunity. Tomorrow many of us will celebrate Labor Day, a day intended for rest from work, to appreciate how much our lives are connected and our well-being is truly dependent on each

other, no matter our professions or callings. In addition to traveling, spending time with family and friends, rest is an opportunity to renew that connection, to sing those songs again, to remember those meaningful stories, to listen to the breeze, the loons, the eagles, all the things that resonate with our deepest being, that ultimately connect us not only to the earth and each other, but the wonderful, life-giving love of God's own heartbeat. However you are spending the holiday, I hope it helps renew and restore your heart to that holy heartbeat.