

# Come Home to Wisdom

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, 16 September 2018.

Proverbs 1:20-33, Psalm 19, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38.

Last weekend, I spent a morning with Dr. Catherine Meeks, Executive Director of the new Absalom Jones Center for Racial Healing in the Diocese of Atlanta. I currently serve on the Advisory Board for the Center, chiefly to be in the presence of Dr. Meeks and try to learn from her. She is 72 years old. She has been doing racial healing work all her life as a writer, college professor, and community organizer. Her most significant contribution to the conversation about race has been to say that the work of racial healing is about spiritual formation, not just diversity training. She spoke here at St. Thomas a few years ago.

Last weekend after we shared Eucharist and before our meeting began she invited us all to see something new in her office. She called it her wall of women. That week she had placed on her office wall a series of photos of women who inspire her. Sojourner Truth. Harriet Tubman. Journalist Ida Wells Barnett. Educator and activist Mary McLeod Bethune. At the center of them all was her mother. These women inspire her.

Or, since music is our theme for today, let's consider what inspires musicians. Bach wrote the initials SDG, Soli Deo Gloria at the end of all of his church compositions and many of his secular ones. It means "to God alone be Glory." He was inspired by the glory of God. Beethoven appears to have been inspired and tortured by his "immortal beloved," whoever that was. Many musicians were inspired by Nature – Vivaldi's Four Seasons, Copland's "Appalachian Spring," or Holst's Planets.

So what inspires you?

The writer of Proverbs wanted people to be inspired by wisdom. Wisdom is pictured as a woman crying out in the streets. You get the sense she has been there a long time pouring out her thoughts, making her guidance known. She tells people things they need to know for their own good. "Those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster." But many do not listen. She grows weary of being ignored. But still she speaks.

The words that follow in Proverbs are a collection of wisdom attributed to King Solomon. Collections like these were somewhat common in the ancient world. Parts of Proverbs sound like similar manuscripts from ancient Egypt. African Proverbs are a key way to pass along wisdom. Even cultures farther away gathered their own wisdom traditions. The Tao de Ching is another example. According to some legends, the Tao was written by Lao Tzu, an archivist at the royal library and known to be the wisest person around. According to the legends, Lao Tzu grew disgusted with the petty infighting and ineptitude of the court and decided to leave the kingdom completely. On his way out of the country, the gatekeeper stopped him and said he would not allow him to leave until he wrote down everything he knew. In a similar way, the biblical tradition is that King Solomon was known for his wisdom. People came from all over the world to hear what he had to say. In Proverbs he wrote down everything he knew.

The practice of gathering wisdom in short, memorable sayings continued to more modern times. Poor Richard's Almanac is in the same tradition. Early to bed early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.

But somewhere along the way, Christians started passing along wisdom and teaching by another way. Not by writing and memorizing proverbs but by singing hymns.

Mary sang when told she would give life to Jesus. Zechariah sang when baby John was born. Paul and Silas sang in prison. Paul quoted an early Christian hymn in Philippians 2 – Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus our Lord. Revelation is one hymn of praise after another. Musical notation was not invented until about 1000 years later, so we do not know the tunes. But we picked up the practice, and ever since then Christians have been a singing people.

Before he became our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry wrote a book about the faith of his grandmother called *Songs My Grandma Sang*. His grandmother was the granddaughter of Alabama slaves. She worked as a domestic worker and put her kids through college. When Bishop Michael was a teenager, his mother, her daughter, suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and ended up in a nursing home for a year before she died. Insurance did not pay for care like that back then. The financial strain nearly broke the family. His grandmother moved in to care for her grandchildren and her son-in-law and bury her daughter.

And throughout her life, the good times and the hard times, she sang. The songs of the church were the background music of her life. His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me. I want Jesus to walk with me. Oh, Freedom. How great thou art. I'm so glad Jesus lifted me. There is a balm in Gilead.

Bishop Curry wrote of his grandmother, "It was her lively, uncompromised, vibrant faith in God that has shaped my deeper level of faith and theological world view. Hers was a faith that really believed 'He's got the whole world in his hands.'" In his grandma's songs, wisdom cried out on the street.

Bishop Curry's grandmother was Baptist. Her daughter joined the Episcopal Church as an adult and brought her Baptist deacon boyfriend to it. He became an Episcopal priest. Bishop Curry is two rare things - a cradle Episcopalian and a PK, priest's kid. He often jokes, "My swaddling clothes were an Episcopal flag."

So his Grandma's hymns were a little different from his church hymns. Most Protestant churches in the US were heavily influenced by the American gospel tradition. These were the hymns of the revival movement and camp meetings. People sometimes call them the old hymns but they are only 100 to 150 years old.

Many of our hymns in the Episcopal Church are older. They come from the English hymn tradition, so they aren't as familiar to some people. Fifteen years ago, when I was feeling called to join the Episcopal Church, I got a copy of Hymnal 1982 and sat down one night at the piano and played my way through it, just to see if I could handle the change.

I quickly realized the hymns of my childhood were still with me, but I was gaining a whole new vocabulary of faith. I want to walk as a child of the light. Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy. Come my way, my truth, my life – by the great English poet and priest George Herbert. St. Patrick's Breastplate – I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, which in my opinion we do not sing often enough. Earth and all stars. Holy Spirit ever living as the Church's very life. The Day of Resurrection, which with the trumpets and that descant just screams Easter.

Bishop Neil Alexander, who served for a time as bishop of this diocese, penned the foreword to Bishop Curry's book about his grandmother. He wrote,

"Christians sing. And the songs of the Church, like the Psalms of Israel, are the most penetrating source of the church's prayer and the most accurate indication of what is close to the hearts of God's people."

Like wisdom crying out in the streets, like Catherine Meeks's wall of women, the songs of the church inspire us. They remind us of what we believe and know to be true. They keep us in tune with God and call us to who we are meant to be. How many times have we gathered in this place in the midst of grief or worry and confessed in confidence "It is well with my soul." How many times have we overflowed with thanksgiving while singing Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven. How many times have we been reminded to follow Jesus a little more faithfully by singing Take up your cross.

So today we aren't just dedicating a beautiful new piano. We are dedicating an instrument of worship and discipleship. This piano will help us sing the background music of our faith. It will lead us to greater faithfulness. It will draw us in the Spirit's tether and keep us marching in the light in the God.

So let the words of this hymn be our prayer.

Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us.

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*Songs My Grandma Sang*, 2015, by Michael Curry. Morehouse Publishing.

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Grace Burton-Edwards

St. Thomas Episcopal Church

Columbus, GA 31906

StThomasColumbus.org

We present this piano to be set apart for the service of Christ's holy Church.

All things come from you, O Lord, and from your own gifts do we give to you.

Let us pray.

O Lord, before whose throne trumpets sound, and saints and angels sing the songs of Moses and the Lamb: Accept this piano for the worship of your temple, that with the voice of music we may proclaim your praise and tell it abroad; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

O God, whose blessed Son has sanctified and transfigured the use of material things: Receive this piano which we offer, and grant that it may proclaim your love, benefit your Christ, and minister grace and joy to those who use it, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We bless your Name, O Lord, because it has pleased you to enable your servants to offer this gift for your worship in memory of your servant Max. Remember them for good, and grant that all who benefit from this gift may show their thankfulness to you by using it in accordance with your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Almighty God, we remember before you today your faithful servant Max; and we pray that, having opened to him the gates of larger life, you will receive him more and more into your joyful service, that, with all who have faithfully served you in the past, he may share in the eternal victory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.