

JULY 18, 2021

# Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON July 4th: “Battle Hymn” Psalm 20:7, Philippians 1:9-11, Ephesians 1:3-4  
(Last week we met for Outdoor Worship and there was a mini concert instead of a sermon)

This morning we are pulling out a patriotic hymn. Appropriate as it’s the 4th of July. Some of you may wonder why I would choose this hymn. Several times you’ve heard me talk about how and why chest thumping patriotism has no place in worship on Sunday morning. This isn’t bashing patriotism. Patriotism is good, necessary, and certainly has its place. Here on Sunday, however, we are here with the express purpose of worshipping God. God and God alone. Anything that might intrude and distract us from that should be avoided and left aside. Patriotism is for many a very strong and proud experience, and so to mix the two likely splits focus and attention.

While this is true, it doesn’t mean that all patriotic music, particularly hymns, are out of place. A couple years ago we talked about how music like God Bless America and America the Beautiful, when sung in the right spirit and attituded, can be genuinely prayerful before God. We sing in gratitude to God for the land in which we live and ask God to guide and bless us as we move forward in that land together. This hymn we will find takes us another direction perhaps more focused in our connection with God.

First published in 1862, this hymn was written by Julia Ward Howe. Unlike the other hymns we’ve looked at to this point, The Battle Hymn of the Republic was not written in England, but America. It was also written about a century later. In fact, it was written during the era of the Civil War. Julia was from New York City, from a well to do family of means. She was educated and a wonderful writer overall. Her theology came from being raised a conservative Episcopalian. As she grew her theology stayed conservative, though she was considered liberal socially for her passion to right the social ills of her day. Being part of many groups that worked towards such ends, by modern standards she may have been considered an activist. I suppose that it’s these leanings that moved her from the Episcopalian church to the Unitarian church where she broke the stereotypes and expectations of the day by frequently filling the pulpit of that church.

Given all of this it’s no surprise that she was staunchly against slavery. Though today people argue over why the Civil War was “actually” fought, for her the stakes were surrounding one great evil, abolishing the institution of slavery. If there’s any doubt about her sensibilities, simply look at the verse which states clearly “He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free”.

The hymn itself actually came on the heels of a challenge, perhaps almost a dare. As Union troops marched through the streets, they did so to a sort of “rallying song” called John Brown’s Body. John Brown was an abolitionist who was hung for his views. The song memorialized him as what I read as a kind of figure to avenge. The lyrics, though, were offensive to Julia and many others. They were somewhat gruesome, with the first verse speaking of John Brown’s “moldering body”. Speaking with a friend, she was challenged that if she was so offended, and given her skill with the pen, to come up with alternate lyrics to the same tune.

Soon after, lying in bed waiting to fall asleep the verses popped into her head. Immediately she jumped out of bed and wrote them down fearing that she’d forget come morning. The song became another rallying cry for the troops and we’ve been singing it ever since. Unlike the hymn Just As I Am, which we learned brought in a ton of money donated to help build a school for the children of poor clergymen, Julia was simply compensated a whopping five dollars for her efforts.

The hymn itself is somewhat misleading. Words like “Battle”, “swift flashing sword”, and “grapes of wrath” conjure up images and feelings of aggression and violence. If not taken in context, one might be persuaded that this hymn is suggesting a kind of “ends justify the means” mentality. Take up arms to accomplish whatever good needs accomplishing. This is mistaken. We have to remember that the war was already joined. The fighting was already happening. This wasn’t a call to start a violent fight. It was a call to make sure the “right” side won because of the stakes at hand. The stakes were more

than keeping a union, they were about doing away with a great evil for the sake of the Godly cause to make all people equal before one another just as they are equal before God. To lose would mean the chance to overcome this institution was also lost.

The spirit of the hymn is inspiring and compelling. Yes, it was written in a specific time under specific circumstances. Nevertheless, the spirit of it is much broader and applicable to so many circumstances. The history of it and the message behind it is both calling and cautionary. In the terms of our scripture, it is part of the key to walking “blameless” before the Lord. Scripture calls each of us to this, and our desire should be as much as possible to do so.

Certainly all of us will have some answering to do when we stand before God one day. Blameless, though, is about more than simply did we violate certain morals or rules. It is also about sin in both what we have stood for, and what we did not. “When you saw this happening, why did you do nothing?” “When you did something, why did you choose to do so in this fashion?”

The calling is that beyond slavery, there is a militant cry to stand up for what is right, good, and Godly. When there are wrongs in the world around us, we are called to stand up against them, and more importantly for the good. Understand here that militant doesn’t mean aggressive and violent. What it means is passionate, uncompromising, firm, and willing to sacrifice for the greater cause and greater good.

This is modeled in the life of Jesus. Over and over again Jesus stood up for the oppressed. The Samaritan, the adulterous woman, the tax collector he uplifted even as he called them too to a better way of being in His love. If there was any harshness in His response, it wasn’t towards those humbly living and whom He was calling. It was towards the ones doing the “stepping”, the ones who thought they had it all together.

To stand against what is wrong and with those who are wronged was and is a key component to His “truth marching on.” Julia Ward Howe believed she had dialed in on one truth, that slavery was a great evil that needed overcoming. I happen to agree with her, however this absolute certainty leads us to one of our cautions as we respond to the call to stand for the good and the Godly. Most simply put, the caution is that if we are going to attach God’s name to our cause and rally people passionately to our side, we better be sure we are correct. To claim we are acting and speaking on God’s behalf is no small thing.

The reason it is no small thing is that once someone believes they are acting in concert with and with the approval of God, there is no dissuading them. There is no authority greater, and so convincing otherwise is nearly impossible. Once God is in the mix, it is a short step to “ends justify the means”, which we’ll address shortly. The point here is that honoring God isn’t just about claiming God as our leader, it is about ensuring the accuracy of what we feel that leader is saying. We gain much greater assurance of our stance and God’s presence in it if we take the time to study what scripture may be saying about it. We don’t cherry pick scriptures. This is the tactic of the manipulator and fraud everywhere. Use selective verses to twist the Bible to what I want it to say rather than diligently pore over scripture for a fuller picture that may cause me to shift my viewpoint. Genuine study, the study that goes deep beneath just the page and English translation to see what is really going on is what helps us at least come closer to knowing we are moving in God’s direction.

There’s still potential for disagreement, however. Remember, the North in the Civil War believed they were fighting for God’s cause. The South also thought they were fighting for God’s cause. Which side was correct? What is striking is that these Christians on either side thought that killing one another was an option to settle their differences. At what point would Christ tell us that the manner in which we disagree with brothers and sisters in Christ involves violence, let alone killing?

This is the gate to the next caution. It’s more than discerning what causes we need to stand for or against in accordance with our understanding of God. It is also how we stand for or against them. Do we pursue the cause in a Christ-like way? This is so critical to our witness. We can do harm to the name of Jesus by even standing for the right thing if we do it in the wrong way. Both are equally significant. This is the pitfall of using God’s name in an “ends justify the means” fashion. It has led to all kinds of atrocities through history that in hindsight have tarnished the name Christian.

Once again, look at Christ. How did He stand up when faced with aggression? In the face of the guards before Pontius Pilate He said little and retaliated none. On the cross He forgave. When confronted by His enemies His defense was to be so wily and wise as to simply befuddle them with His responses to their questions and accusations. When asked about what to do if struck on the cheek He said “turn the other one.” Jesus’ first, second, and beyond recourse was never cruelty, callousness, or violence.

It is possible to both stand passionately and steadfastly for a righteous cause, and do it in the spirit of compassion and grace.

This tension is at the heart of our Christian experience. To have the steeled resolve to be unbending when advocating for a Godly cause and also do it with the spirit of Christ. It’s not easy, but it’s necessary. The lament we hear over and over again today is the result of not holding this tension. Why is this? Because it’s easier. It’s easier to simply run full steam ahead to the extreme that agrees with us and feeds our base instincts that lead to division and battle lines being drawn. It’s easy because in this place we find nothing pushing against us and everything supporting us and even throwing

gasoline on the fire. We see ourselves as a hero and the other as the villain.

The reality is that the extremes seldom hold the full absolute on truth. "His truth" marching on is more "Our truth" attributed to God. The other side of the coin often holds some solid truths amidst their faults just as our own does. When we flee to the extremes the conversation isn't conversation at all. It's talking point after talking point that the other already knows and disagrees with. Shouting them back and forth is just pointless, futile clashing that pushes us further away from resolving the problem than bringing us closer.

But what about this Holy tension? This holding the what and the how together?

Disagreeing in the spirit of Jesus lets us see the other in a different light. Just as Jesus saw the "sinner" not for who they were in their sin, but for who they were created to be. We can see one another as children of God deserving of dignity and with inherent worth. We can love one another despite our differences rather than hating because of them. This idea of "seeing" each other is so critical. It is what connects us, and ultimately if we all can embrace it leads to solutions rather than deepening the divide.

Rather than shouting talking points at one another, we go deeper. Layers and layers deeper. Rather than simply arguing about "what" is believed, we start to wonder "why". What experiences led us to our conclusions? What has happened to us? What has been taught to us? How has the experience of our loved ones influenced what we believe and why?

What. Is. Our. Story? We share our stories and in so doing we understand one another. In sharing and hearing one another's stories, and caring about them, we may not end in agreement but we can start to understand the journeys that lead to a differing view. This connection, this understanding, this love is what opens us to see where we may be mistaken, and does the same for the other. This is where we connect. This is where we resolve. It is often in the midst of the love that brings this together that we find Christ.

We must remember that tension is always there. The tension within us holds the what and how together in a way that connects and unites. If we let this go and relieve the tension within, there is still tension. It's simply that we feed into the larger, divisive, aggressive tension that overarches everyone.

In sorting out our differences in this fashion, we begin to come closer to the desire of Christ revealed in His third prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in the gospel of John. He asked that we would "all be one". That all believers would be united together in the common cause of bringing the world to faith, and a faith that brings the Kingdom to bear in the world. This brings us to something we talked about last week in the Holy Trinity. Jesus said "let them be one as We are one." In other words that we would be united as perfectly as the persons of the Trinity. Separate yet entirely equal, in concert, in harmony, which ultimately leads to agreement.

We know from scripture that the three persons in some way are in conversation. Look back to Genesis. "Let US make man in OUR image." What is this image? There is wide disagreement. To me it is the image of love with the power to choose. What the verse reveals is that there is some sense of conversation happening with more than one. When they ate of the fruit, there is this sense of "what are we going to do with them? They ate from the tree of knowledge, what if they eat from the tree of life?" Out of love for humanity and the consequence were imperfect creatures allowed to live for ever there was only one solution. Evict them. Notice, however, that there is conversation. Yet not one person said to the other two "I told you so! I told you if we made them like Us this would happen!" They are harmonious, congruent, united, and they find both agreement and resolution to presented problems.

Certainly there is more to it, but part of the power of the Trinity is unity. All the powers pulling in the same direction. Regarding one another. Seeking what is best not for one but all. Seeking what is best not for Godself but also for the creatures God has made. In the case of Jesus, doing so even at great personal sacrifice. This unity is life giving and world changing.

Imagine if we had this kind of unity. What would happen if we were likewise in harmony, unity, concert, and hopes and desires? What would the world look like. I'd wager much different. We would find the fullness of God and in so doing find the fullness of ourselves both individually and communally. Ultimately, we would find the harmony and power to bring the Kingdom of God here and now. God's will done on earth as in heaven.