

2021 Michigan Annual Conference
Teaching | Rev. Dr. Cynthia Wilson
Intentional Intergenerational Discipleship through Worship
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Dr. Wilson singing ...

Daw-kee, aim daw-tsi-taw to-aw-bay taw haal,
Daw-kee, aim daw-tsi-taw to-aw-bay taw haal,
Pbay-gya kee aal ai dahm gya daw,
daw-keah pbay-gya yah tsahn-day-toaw.

Great Spirit, now I pray to you,
I pray now to you, Great Spirit, hear me;
my soul is weary, now I pray
that your Spirit will dwell in me.

VIDEO CLIP: (Native American man speaking) In the 1800s, the Muskogee Creek and Seminole people were forced from their lands by the US government. Some call it the Trail of Tears or Death March. The people sang songs as they marched. Some of them were Christian songs written in the Muskogee language. Thousands died along the way to Indian territory. Countless people drowned in the Mississippi River. In our songs, the people refer to the Mississippi River as the river of death.

My grandma Johnny Mays favorite song was Espoketis omes Kerreskos. It translates to this may be the last time we don't know. When she was dying, we sang it to her. She wasn't really conscious, but we noticed that when we'd sing it, she would tap her finger to the beat of the song. I remember hearing her talking about the song when she was well. She would say, "That's my song." It's a song I grew up hearing as an Indian song. Though the rhythm always felt a little different from the others. I never knew why. But a quick search will lead you through music history. The song comes out of the 1800s. At some point, it was a slave spiritual. The song then travels through gospel and blues adaptation. In the 1960s, Staple Singers have a hit record. Keith Richards then hears it and adapts it into the Rolling Stone song, The Last Time.

It's not recorded when it was first sung in the Muskogee language. But it hasn't changed from the original version. For most things in native communities, change isn't necessarily looked at as a good thing. It can represent loss, loss of culture, and loss of the way things used to be. I remember my aunt's funeral. We were all at the graveside. None of the elders had gotten out of the car because it was so hot that day. Frank Mopin was the preacher, and we were about to lower the casket. Frank started singing Creek hymn. There was nothing but young people there, so when Frank began to sing, no one could sing along. No one knew the songs. I realized then how few people were actually learning then.

Dr. Wilson resumes

And so this idea of synthesis of culture is embodied in the video that we have just watched. And our first nation siblings, alongside our African slavery ancestors shared a sense of synthesis in this song.

(Singing). A sense of strangeness in the Muskogee Creek camp as they sang this song that actually originated amongst the African peoples. (Singing). And so, how in fact, are they able to sing this strange song in another land? How did they figure the ways in which the song made sense in their camps?

Much like we read in the second chapter of Acts, where the various tribes have gathered together as they have been instructed by Jesus in the upper room, they have come from various places, and spaces. You remember reading some of you in that second chapter as the role is called from Phrygia and Pamphylia in Egypt. And on and on and on, but they come together at the synthesis of their various cultures, gives an opportunity for the promise to be kept. Yes, they came together in one place and they came together on one accord.

And obviously, the promise is kept, and the Holy Spirit falls in the room. And so they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, and to fellowship. To the breaking of bread and to prayer, everyone was filled with all the many signs and wonders performed by the apostles. All the believers were together. And here's what we want to land on. And they had everything in common, a synthesis of culture. And most importantly, they shared their songs. They worshiped together daily. They met together in the temple courts, they broke bread in their homes, they ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God. That's worship. And enjoying the favor of all people and the Lord added to their number daily, those who were being saved. How did they sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

So, this synthesis of culture translated into the worship experience, the work of worship. It became a vital transformative experience. It's where the disciple making experiment began. This experiment that purposefully creates a space in a time when the beloved community gathers to celebrate this liturgical encounter. How did they sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Well, if you read through that entire second chapter of Acts, we find very important elements. What are they? The spirit of fellowship, the spirit of joint partnership, the spirit of participation, the spirit of communion, it was the spirit of sharing, and caring, and it was the spirit of intimacy. And so, the beloved community is established. And the spirit of discipleship begins on purpose. Three years ago, at Discipleship Ministries, where I serve as the director for worship and preaching and music, and liturgical resources, we launched a campaign. You might have heard about it.

It was entitled, and is entitled, see all the people. We made a decision that it was important that the work of discipleship ministries would embody the spirit of the beloved community much like what we read in the second chapter of Acts. Much like we discover in the video, where this synthesis of cultures begins to bring together a united front, how appropriate for the United Methodist Church. And so friends, it was in the spirit of the beloved community, it's in the spirit of a created community of koinonia. The Greek word simply means communion or participation. It's in the spirit of ubuntu. It's the Shona word for, I am, because we are. It was in the spirit of comunidad, Español word for a collective body. In the spirit of sawubona, Zulu word simply meaning I see you. And in all of these collective instances, we find a community that has been created and a community that discovers how it is that they have so very much in common. Beloved community.

That learns how to sing the songs of Zion in strange places, with persons with whom we have never partaken of the food and of the worship and the song. You might remember in 1962, Catholic Church discovered a similar situation where many of the worship experiences tended to be a bit separated. And so the Catholic Church determined that they would pull together an event called Vatican Two. You remember that? In Vatican Two in 1962, the church updated its liturgy, and it created a space and a place so that the laity of the church might become active participants in the spirit of worship. It was an exciting time for the church. They did several things with this movement toward gathering the people and inviting them in to help lead what worship was for the Catholic Church. So, they brought about a renewal, a time and a spirit of spiritual renewal for the Catholic Church. Secondly, it had been 100 years since the church had turned from singular worship. It had been 100 years since the Catholic church had actually turned the alters so that the people might face the alters.

It had been hundreds of years, since the people had actually been given the opportunity to speak the mass, the service in their own languages, it had been an impossible task for the people to feel as if they were a part of the experience, the work of worship. Spoke in languages that they could all understand. And how were they able to do so much like in the second chapter of Acts? I want to believe that it was by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit that the people were given their voices to return to that space in place of participatory worship. They were fully, actively, consciously given space to participate in praise, in prayer, in preaching, in song, in hymnody, and the world of Catholicism was transformed. Unbelievably, the people were given permission to embody the song through sitting, through standing, through kneeling, through bowing, through experiencing the grace and the liberating presence of God our creator who loves us. Who loves us enough to send the power in the presence of the Holy Spirit to give us a song that we could all sing.

It was in 1995, that the Lutheran Federation, for the Lutheran Church gathered together. Much like the second chapter of Acts, much like Vatican Two, the Lutheran Church crafted a powerful statement. It's called the Nairobi Statement. Now all of a sudden, much like in that second chapter of Acts, they found themselves in a presence and a power that made them no longer strangers. And so, Psalm 137 reminds us that it was by the rivers of Babylon, that the Israelites sat, and they wept as they had remembered their home. Much like with the song that the Muskogee Creek folk sung, that had not really been a part of their culture, until somehow in reading their history, they found this song that had been given to them by a strange people called Africans. The Nairobi Statement brought to mind, the Nairobi Statement gave permission to the Lutherans to begin to sing songs outside of what they were accustomed to singing.

How do we sing the Lord's song folks in a strange land? Well, may I tell you? I'm glad you asked. The Song of the Lord must be **contextual**. Context. Would you say that word with me? Context. Contextual song varies according to a local situation. Contextual song is both from the natural way of being, as well as from what is going on in a particular culture. The Lord's song must be contextual.

Secondly, the Lord's song must be **cross-cultural**. Just say that with me, cross-cultural. The cross-cultural song makes it possible for those singing to share between their local cultures. So again, we can sing the Lord's song if it's contextual. We can sing the Lord's song if it's cross-cultural.

And then thirdly, if it's going to be the Lord's song, it must be **trans-cultural**. Would you say that with me? Trans-cultural. Meaning the same substance for everyone everywhere, beyond culture. Trans-cultural.

So, if we're going to sing the Lord's song, it must be contextual, it must be cross-cultural, and it must be trans-cultural. And fourthly, in this Nairobi Statement, the Lutherans suggested that the Lord's song must be **counter-cultural**. Would you say that with me? Counter-cultural. Simply meaning that this song must be challenging, what is contrary to the gospel in a given culture. Contextual, cross-cultural, trans-cultural, and counter-cultural. So, friends, we have talked through several movements, several places in history, where the people of God have moved from one space, one place, separate and apart from each other into a different space, into a different place, a place where the spirit of community is formed.

And we've talked about how that formation, that formation that moved through a spiritual renewal, that formation that turned altars from the backs of people to their faces, so that they might actively consciously, fully, participate in the spirit of worship. These movements that gave the people their voices back. These movements that created a space and a place for this enterprise called worship. What then, is worship? This place in this space where God's peoples' voices are returned and they are able to sing? What is this thing called worship? It is in fact, the work of the people. Worship is the work of the people. Again, as the Nairobi Statement reminds us, this work must be contextual, it must be cross-cultural, it must be trans-cultural, and it must be counter-cultural. It's only then that this work becomes koinonia, it becomes ubuntu, it becomes comunidad, it becomes sawubona.

It's the place in the space where God's people are able to experience the synthesis of culture. There are so few things that we can do in community together simultaneously, but there is one thing that we can certainly do together. And that is to sing the Lord's song. Whether the land is familiar, whether the land is strange. The Danish theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, captivated by the enterprise of worship, wrote and offered a critical analysis of an elitist understanding of worship, which was promulgated by church leaders. Leaders, Kierkegaard suggests, began to see themselves as elitist, liturgical leaders, they were preachers and celebrants, musicians, script writers, readers, they promoted themselves to this lofty place this place of superiority. They felt that they were the only persons equipped to do the work of worship. Kierkegaard was disturbed by the sense of superiority on the part of the leaders of worship. And so consequently, worship had taken on the image of an unfolding drama, where the members of the congregation were demoted to a lesser role. Mere spectators if you will. And the leaders assumed a pastor of the lead actors and actresses.

Well, Kierkegaard sought to correct this erroneous image. Created a different metaphor, more positive by renaming the leaders stage hands, or prompters in worship. This metaphor suited Kierkegaard, because in his mind, it meant that those who served at the helm of worship, really needed to see themselves as

servant leaders, rather than stars taking the starring role of this unfolding drama. And the congregation, well, they're restored to their rightful places. They're restored to their intended liturgical role. That is that they now are the actresses and the actors. They actually stand out in the salvation story. And they understand themselves as creating this drama unfolding before an audience of one, God and only God, the divine audience. What would happen in 2021, as we think about the ways in which we return into our spaces and places of worship, in fellowship, in partnership, in participation, in communion with each other, sharing and caring, in a sense of intimacy?

What would happen if we as leaders, those of us who are responsible for the unfolding drama of worship, understood ourselves to be the servants in aprons, in gloves, in hats, while the people of God find themselves carrying out this unfolding drama? What would happen to 21st century worship? I would submit to you tonight that it is through the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, that same spirit that fell on the day of Pentecost. When these various peoples from different places came to themselves, obeyed the command of Jesus, gather in one place on one accord. And when you do, I'm not going to leave you comfortless, Jesus said to them, "I'm going to send you a comforter. I'm going to send you the paraclete, a mediator." The Holy Spirit, who will bring you into a spirit of community, beloved community. Then you are no longer strangers. Then your songs are placed into the mouths of those who have never sung them before. These songs no longer can be identified as strange songs. Your sisters and your brothers are no longer strangers. I learned early in my ministry that music in worship functions.

Let me tell you what I mean by that. There is a cathartic action going on in the human body when music is made. Somewhere along the line, it was suggested that music functioned in only one part of the human brain. And as I studied this thing more deeply, I discovered that in order for music to fully function, it functions throughout the entire brain. And as the brain sends the signals to every part of the body, music functions as a catharsis for the soul. So, think about during the 60s, during the Civil Rights Movement, some of you have seen perhaps tapes from that experience, where the people are marching, arm in arm. And not only are they marching, but they're doing what? They're singing. And the song of the movement becomes a conveyor belt moving the people along in a peaceful, beloved community essence. It's the music that is being produced from these bodies, from the body of persons who are crying out for peace and justice and right living.

It is the music I submit to you, my sisters and brothers, that functions, it functions as a way for the people of God, the people of the world, people in our schools and in our families. It is the music that serves, that functions as that which brings sawubona, ubuntu, koinonia, those rhythms and those harmonies, those notes, the ways in which they come together brings about a peace that passes all understanding. I don't know I just have a feeling that if we really get serious about the ways in which we can sing the Lord's song, even in strange times, even in COVID, we can sing and never get tired. Huh? I love the scripture that talks about the ways in which we ought to speak to each other. The scripture, Ephesians five and 19 says to us, we ought to speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. I traveled many years ago to Soweto. Immediately after the apartheid system was dismantled. I traveled with a group from the upper room. We went to Soweto to do the first walk to mass.

And I remember so clearly when the women of Soweto opened their mouth and began to sing. Because you see I went as the song leader, but when they open their mouths to sing, can I tell you that I really did not feel that I had what was needed to serve as the director of music, it was already there. And the entire visit during that entire time as I watched the indigenous peoples being served by those Africans who had unjustly treated the natives of South Africa, when I watched them begin to sing the songs of the indigenous peoples, then I recognized what it was that Jesus was instructing us to do in this particular passage, sing to each other, talk to each other in psalms and hymns, and spiritual songs. I found myself in Russia right after the big wall came down. And I found myself in the street singing the songs of Zion and the people in the street stopping to listen and mimicking the song. The strange song from these strange peoples and I watched them. I've watched a cathartic transformation take place right there in the streets of Russia.

I remember being in Copenhagen, hundreds of people had come to sing and they came to sing the songs of Zion. They did not speak my language; they did not know the songs. And yet as we sang, they

mimicked what they heard. And by the end of the evening, hundreds came to Christ. I'm not really sure where they are today, I just know that in this strange place, following the leadership of the strange person, these people experienced a catharsis of the soul. It was in Australia, Sydney, that I met the Aborigines women in a little bitty room, they had never seen an African American woman. And they certainly had never seen an African American woman lead a song. But by the time we ended our conversation, I taught them a song. (Singing). Simple song. (Singing).

You'd never see faces light up like they did in that little bitty room. I imagine much like the upper room, as they sang this strange song. Speak to each other in spirituals, speak to each other in hymns. (Singing). I found my self teaching in a high school in Fort Worth, Texas. This was a school of the arts for young people who were gifted, but they weren't quite able to make it in the regular setting of the public school system. I found myself in my choir room, sitting with a young man who was just distraught. And he would say to me, "Dr. Wilson, I have all of this music in my belly and I want to sing it, but the church won't... They won't let me sing my song." Well, needless to say, years later, this young man's song is in the mouths of people all over the world.

He simply uses that same hymn, but he translates it a little different to the traditional rendering of that hymn. His name is Kirk Franklin. And so, Frank wrote a song. He... Kirk, wrote a song, he rewrote, he reworked that hymn and he said, (singing). He said it like this. (Singing). He said, (singing). He said, (singing). And then he added a verse. He said, (singing). How do we sing the Lord's song in strange places? God bless you.