

Lord of Love

Text: “My kingdom is not from this world.”
John 18:36a

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Westminster Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Illinois
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When I was with you four years ago I told you about my granddaughter Caroline’s love for the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” sung to Beethoven’s Hymn to Joy. I heard her humming the tune one day and pulled out my hymn book to teach her the first verse of the Henry Van Dyke text. For a time, we sang it almost every time we got together. I was amazed by how quickly she memorized the first few verses.

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of Glory, Lord of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, Opening to the sun above;
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, Drive the gloom of doubt away,
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day.*

Caroline still loves that hymn. We sing it to say grace before meals. She sometimes sings it as her bedtime prayer. She is now nine and she has a little sister named Margot who will soon be five. And guess what, Margot loves this hymn as well. When she began memorizing the text she had trouble pronouncing all of the words. In her rendition, “Joyful, joyful” sounded like “Jerful, jerful.” “Lord of love” came across as “Yord of yuv.”

Sometimes I find Margot humming the tune. And when that happens she looks up at me with a sly grin on her face and a twinkle in her eye and says, “This is *your* song, Papa!” “Joyful, Joyful” has never been my favorite hymn. I can think of a dozen hymns I like better. But my granddaughters have given it to me. It has become a bond that both defines and energizes our relationship. And it’s not really *my* song, it is *our* song. I can’t sing it without thinking of them. They may never be able to sing it without remembering me.

What my granddaughters have done with this hymn is something of a miracle. They have chosen to love it and they have used it to teach me that I am not in control of the relationship we share. I am not in charge. They are choosing the music. They are reminding me of an important truth about our relationship with God. The Lord of love we celebrate and worship in this hymn is giving us a song. A song that is always at work in our hearts and transforming us in ways we do not expect. A song that changes us not from the top down but from the inside out.

A similar dynamic was at the heart of the exchange between Pilate and Jesus in the 18th chapter of John. As a provincial Roman governor Pilate was heavily invested in the assumption that power always flows from the top down. It is his job to impose Roman rule in a province that resists it. There is in fact an active insurgency seeking to throw off Roman rule led by people called the zealots. When Jesus comes before him, Pilate wants to know if this man is a leader of that insurgency. That's why he asks Jesus if he aspires to be a king. It is Pilate's job to use military force and mass executions to root out the zealots and all the others who oppose Roman rule. If Jesus is one of them, Pilate will have no mercy in sentencing him to a brutal execution.

The safest reply for Jesus would have been a simple "no." Or he could have briefly acknowledged the Roman contribution to better roads and a stronger trade-based economy. That is an answer that could have given Pilate a way to avoid condemning Jesus to die on a cross. But Jesus refuses to give Pilate an easy way out. He also refuses to tell the zealots what they want to hear. He does not use the language of resistance or claim the authority of an earthly king. He will not be a king like David, leading an army to throw the Romans out. Instead, Jesus answers Pilate by claiming a different kind of leadership that must have sounded bizarre to the Roman governor. He says to Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world (John 18:36)."

Jesus came to bring a different kind of kingdom. His kingdom is not built on military or political power, imposing authority from the top down. Jesus' kingdom is built on the song that flows from the Lord of love. The song that binds people to God and one another. The song that empowers ordinary people to change the world from the bottom up. The power of that song was something neither Pilate nor the zealots could understand. "My kingdom is not from this world."

These words of Jesus resonated in the hearts and minds of the Protestants of France who found their world turned upside down in the seventeenth century. Louis XIV was determined to destroy Protestant faith and worship within his kingdom and any other European country he could conquer. It is significant that Louis XIV's first act of persecution against his Protestant subjects was a law prohibiting the public singing of the psalms. Louis had almost certainly heard the Huguenots sing and he knew their devotion to their songs distinguished them from his other subjects. He probably understood that singing these songs of faith was what defined them and energized them as a people. Louis began by trying to take away their songs but soon moved on to harsher measures. In a classic example of power imposed from the top down he issued an edict in 1685 that outlawed Protestant faith and worship in France.

On one level, Louis' edict worked very well. He had the power to make it stick. In just a few months every Protestant church building in the country was destroyed depriving Huguenots of their last legal place to sing. Another sign of success for the king was that his Protestant subjects did not follow the way of the zealots. They did not challenge Louis' authority in an armed rebellion. But at a more profound level Louis' edict failed. The singing continued. About 200,000 Huguenots successfully fled the country and learned to sing the Lord's song in foreign lands. This massive exodus deprived France of some of its best educated and most productive citizens. The Huguenots who were left behind in France, numbering more than 500,000, took their singing underground. They worshiped in their homes or in isolated wilderness settings. They called themselves the church of the desert. When religious freedom was finally restored in France more than a hundred years later, 500,000 Protestants came out into the light of day. Their king destroyed their churches but he couldn't kill the songs. Singing connected them to the Lord of love who was changing them from the inside out.

My forthcoming book tells the story of a large group of these French Protestant exiles who fled to England and then settled along the Rappahannock River of Virginia during the last decade of the seventeenth century. Because they didn't establish a town and weren't legally permitted to have their own church they have remained hidden from historians—until now. The records suggest this French exile community may have

included as many as a thousand refugees—perhaps the largest seventeenth-century Huguenot community in North America. This book could not have been written without you. I began the research in France eighteen years ago on a renewal leave that you made possible. When I returned I shared with many of you the connection I was making between Huguenot ancestors in Virginia and the western French congregation that nurtured them. Some of you then said, “You have to write a book!” Seven years later, on my last Sunday as your pastor, one of these Westminster saints, now deceased, shook my hand and said, “I am still waiting for your book.” Thank you, Westminster, for helping me see that this is an important story. By bringing their song across the Atlantic these immigrants, like so many others who have come since, have shown us how to keep singing even when our world is turned upside down. They knew the song that connects us to the Lord of love who is changing us from the inside out.

This is the truth that was embraced by the founders of this congregation. Albert Hale spoke against slavery because he was so intimately connected to the Lord of love. In his 1847 sermon against the Mexican War Hale declared that scripture teaches that all human beings “belong to one family.”¹ Because we are one family we do not enslave or exploit our brothers and sisters. Because we are one family we do not engage in wars of conquest. When an enslaved man knocked on Albert Hale’s door seeking freedom and the opportunity to study for the ministry, Hale took him into his home and directed his theological education. He understood they were both part of the same family. When the time came for Hale to set aside his preaching ministry he dedicated himself to serving the people of Springfield who could not provide for their own needs. They were part of his family, too. Albert Hale never stopped singing the song that connects us to the Lord of love and changes us from the inside out. He sang when he was physically assaulted outside the state capital. He sang when his family received death threats. He sang because he could not relinquish his vision of the single family of God. He sang because he understood what Jesus’ ministry was all about. He knew Jesus was far more dangerous than Pilate dared imagine.

Through the Steadfast Neighbor Habitat Build you are continuing to sing the same song. You are continuing to honor Albert Hale’s vision of a family God that is far more

diverse than we can imagine. As steadfast neighbors you are a sign of God's peace and wholeness in a broken world. You are changing the world from the bottom up.

Like Albert Hale, we live in trying times as strident voices seek to divide the human family. Do not live in fear and never give up hope. Our task is not to win the political or cultural struggles of our time. Our task is to change the world from the bottom up by the power of the Christ who lives in our hearts. Remember that God has given us a song. A song we can sing before meals. A song we can sing before we go to bed. A song that will center our lives on God's priorities of grace, mercy, and peace. A song that will steady us when our world is turned upside down. A song that will embrace us when death comes. No power can ever destroy this song. No one can take it from us. It is the song that binds us to the Lord of love.

ⁱ Albert Hale, "Two Discourses on the Subject of the War Between the United States and Mexico Preached in the Second Presbyterian Church in Springfield on Sabbath, 11 July 1847," *Sangamo Journal*, August 1847.