

Psalm 96
James 5: 13- 16a
Matthew 13: 44-52

Reflections on the Sabbatical Season of Renewal
Musical Celebration Sunday – September 27, 2015
Mary R. Brownlow

Some of you may have heard the old folk rhyme:

Something old,
something new,
something borrowed,
something blue.

In England, they used to add “and a silver sixpence in her shoe,” ...though it might be hard these days to find a silver sixpence, even on that side of the ocean. This is a rhyme that gives some directions for a bride on her wedding day: how to dress for good luck. This week, for the first time, I put it together with the words from the Gospel reading. In times of transition, at the milestones of our lives, we put together the old and the new, and then a whole new creation may be born: new life, new relationships... joy and purpose.

We are all doing this all the time, actually. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we juxtapose primal memories with present realities. To each new experience, we bring old hopes, old fears, old prejudices and old comforts. That makes us who we are, and that’s what can make life so rich...particularly when we come together in community. And, just to layer on one more level of complexity, what’s new to me might not be new to you. Hence our “interesting” life together as a congregation. Hence our interesting struggles to live faithfully into a future together.

I think about all of this as we talk about spiritual renewal – the theme of our sabbatical summer. We were like the one who brought out of his treasure what was new and what was old – sang it, listened to it, thought about it, prayed about it – the familiar and unfamiliar. I was doing this while I was in San Francisco and in England and Scotland, pushing the edges of my comfort zone a bit, experimenting a bit, breathing a lot, bringing together the memory and moment, and watching others do the same. And why? Not because it was an end in itself, but because I was searching for the new creation that God promises, a treasure, a pearl of great value, some new reality that gives form and purpose to the Christian life.

In the Christian vocabulary, this new reality is called the Kingdom of God, or the Reign of God. Jesus drew lots of word pictures to help people understand the way that the kingdom was already present and yet completely new and surprising. So many Gospel passages begin with “the Kingdom of God is like” ...yeast, or a mustard seed, or a man going out to plant seeds, or a feast, or a fishing net, or treasure hidden in a field, or finding a pearl of great value. These parables encouraged people to juxtapose a familiar image with an unknown or unperceived level of relationship and commitment. They encouraged people to look deep and to dig deeper.

Something old, something new....primal memories and present realities...all leading to an unknown future.

Many of my primal memories involve my parents: big surprise. As many of you know, my mother, Jane, who died 12 years ago, was profoundly deaf. She never heard me speak or sing. She had to glean what she could from lip-reading and visual clues. When she came to church here, she never heard the organ play or the choir sing, though she watched them with great interest. So part of my primal memory is that awareness of a world without sound, a spirituality without sound. A program of music as an instrument of spiritual renewal would be pretty pointless for my mother. On the other hand, my father, who could hear quite well, loved music – and he had quite an eclectic taste. He sometimes sang hymns around the house on Sunday mornings...but he never went to church. When he wanted quiet reflection time, he would wander around the yard and garden with a handmade wooden flute, just noodling around by himself. Did music renew his spirit? Yes, I am pretty sure it did.

As I juxtapose this primal memory with my present reality, I look out at a group of people with many memories, many needs, joys, hopes, fears, loves, strengths... and many gifts. Some of these involve music, some don't. And I ask, how could this gathering, and the larger body of Christ we hold dear, possibly search together for precious pearls and find the pearl of great value? For us, this priceless pearl, this new reality, this already-and-not-yet Kingdom will involve a leap of faith and trust. It will mean believing, actually believing, that God has great things in store for this church: that our future will be as compelling and exciting and life-giving as any moment in our past. The pearl of great price means that we have found a way to be God's holy work in the world. Spiritual renewal means that we can see a way forward, where our joys, hopes and strengths combine into something visible, audible, and tangible. A treasure, a song, an embrace, a feast. That is what is offered to us: a gift of grace. Thanks be to God.

Reflection on the NCC Summer of Song,
Bob Miller

Last February, I was given the chance as a member of the Sabbatical Planning Committee to speak about the Lilly Grant that we had received and the opportunity for pastoral and congregational renewal.

With the Lilly Grant, we all had been given a gift. And I asked the question then, “what are we going to do with this gift?”

For me personally, and I know for many of you, this summer has been a wonderful gift. There have been a diversity of hidden treasures, pearls of creativity, connection and love among us, and good, so much good, as we cast our nets out into the community and invited our neighbors and friends to join us for a Summer of Music to fill our souls.

I think back on the moments that filled my soul—and I'm sure that you can think of many of your own special moments.

I think back on the start in May. It began with the Junior Choir Festival, the ringing of hand bells, and the voices of children singing: “Jubilate, Servite,” translated as: “Sing joyfully to God, all the earth; serve the Lord with gladness.”

Also in May, there was the musical workshop with Kathy Eddy. And the text I remember most from that evening was a text by Hellen Keller put to music by Kathy Eddy. It reads: "I'm only one, but I'm still one. I can't do everything, but I can do something. I'll not refuse the something I can do."

On May 24th, the congregation came together in a moment of pure synergy and love to wish Mary goodbye on her sabbatical and sing to the Sound of Music, "So long, farewell, Auf Wiedersehen, goodbye/We'll miss you so, we cannot tell a lie."

And then we plunged into the uncertain and the unknown. And as a member of the Sabbatical Planning Committee, I can say we were worried. We were worried that we would throw a party and that no one would come. I'll bet that many of you as well were not so sure about the summer ahead.

But soon we had The Reverend Jo Shelnutt, with her angelic voice, her energy, her approachable manner, and her Dan & Whit's t-shirt.

We also had Evelyn Ellis playing an amazing Mozart concerto on clarinet. With many hands, we hosted Village Harmony, *twice*, and both times completely filled our sanctuary with singing and members of the community.

We had Tony Leach join us to teach us how to sing Gospel Music. Barely over a week after the shootings at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, Tony shared with us a bit about his own life story and his recent visit to Charleston, and we sang together, "Lookin' out over Jordan, all I could see/A band of angels comin' after me./Someday my soul shall be free/I shall be free"

"I'm only one, but I'm still one. I can't do everything, but I can do something. I'll not refuse the something I can do."

We had Bruce and Caleb Freeberg sing and teach us about old time gospel music. We hosted the Young Artists from Opera North. We shared two beautiful evenings on the green with our Norwich neighbors, as the young singing group Carter Glass and the Nischt Geferlach Klezmer Band entertained us and even moved us to dance.

For those whose spiritual gifts and interests lay outside of music, Pastor Jo organized a writing workshop with Maren Tirabassi, and a visual arts workshop with Mandy Lape-Freeberg, which resulted in the creation of this beautiful banner.

And finally, we have had so many fine musical performances from you, the congregation, and sharing of musical and other gifts from the heart.

Speaking for myself and the remarkable Sabbatical Planning Committee, Kathy Sherlock-Green, Tacy Calaiacomo, Evelyn Ellis, Jane Helms, and Doug Lufkin, what I'd like to say is:

Thank you. Thank you all for the wonderful gifts that we have given each other and the community this summer. It has been a privilege to have had the opportunity to share this much fun and joy.

In the children's Drama Camp performance, "Oh, Jonah," Jonah turns and walks away from God. He then goes through a period of uncertainty in the belly of the whale. When he emerges from the whale in a kind of "renewal," God calls again, and Jonah turns away again and again.

The week after Mary left in May, Susan White gave a memorable sermon. She spoke of renewal, what it means to be renewed in faith, renewed in spirit. But more importantly, she spoke of God's call to us as a people renewed in faith to care for each other and to step out into the world to care for others.

Renewal is not an end in itself. It is a beginning.

And if this summer has taught me anything, it is this:

As a church, as the Norwich Congregational Church, yes, we are only one. But we are still one. This summer has shown me that we truly are *one in spirit*. We can't do everything, no we can't, but we can do something. Let us not refuse the something, indeed, the many things, that we can do.