

Grace Notes in Miniature

Friday January, 22nd, 2021

Dear friends,

As we come to the end of the week of Prayer for Christian Unity, it seems very fitting that Sunday's Gospel tells of Jesus calling his first disciples. I really enjoy this hymn by Suzanne Toolan which feels very much like a sea shanty. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scxYaJGqXQ8> and am sorry that we shan't be able to sing this in rousing chorus in church this year. Music is an important part of celebration in our lives – whether it is “Happy Birthday” (or the song often sung in French Canada, <<Mon cher ami (ou Ma chère amie), c'est à ton tour: de te laisser parler d'amour>>), “Auld Lang Syne”, “We are the Champions” – even “O Canada”, and music in our liturgy is no different. I have lived by the motto, attributed to St Augustine but which I can't substantiate, that “[One] who sings prays twice”. I find that often when I cannot think of the words I want to offer in prayer I can think of a hymn or song which fits. Hymns which we may have learned many years ago can come back to us with great clarity, bringing very powerful memories of an event. When my mother was drifting into advanced dementia and had periods of being very confused and frightened, I could often calm her and bring her back into the present moment by beginning to sing one of the hymns I knew she had sung in her younger years. She invariably remembered all the words and the experience of singing would calm her and prompt her to remember in fine detail stories of her past.

I heard this beautiful story on the CBC a while ago and wanted to share it with you:

<https://alzheimerlondon.ca/intergenerational-choir/> I discovered that similar groups



have sprung up around Ontario with great benefit and I am sure the students involved in this initiative will never forget the impact of this. I'm sure that this is a group which will be very happy to resume their gatherings when it is safe to do so. “Listening to and performing **music** reactivates areas of the brain associated with **memory**, reasoning, speech, emotion, and reward.

Two recent studies—one in the United States and the other in Japan—found that **music** doesn't just help us retrieve stored memories, it also helps us lay down new ones.”

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/music-can-boost-memory-and-mood#:~:text=Listening%20to%20and%20performing%20music,us%20lay%20down%20new%20ones>



I remember a lot of things from songs: for example, the Laws of Thermodynamics, which I learned from comedians/musicians Flanders and Swann. I hummed this in a physics exam with good outcome! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnbiVw_1FNs Or Tom Lehrer's "The Elements" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGM-wSKFBpoor> or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rz4Dd1l_fXO ? I am sure you can think of others.

We also find ourselves remembering scripture passages which we have learned through singing hymns, Psalms and Canticles. People were able to learn from these long before



literacy and affordable books enabled them to read the Scriptures for themselves. I think of Canticles such as Luke 1:46-55, the "Magnificat", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTEL_7TS5FE and "Benedictus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQwAb00vrIM> One of my great-grandfathers was the precentor or leader of music – all a capella – of the small Church of Scotland parish in the fishing village where my mother

grew up. It was his job to "line" the music, to sing each line of the hymn which would then be echoed by the congregation, many of whom may not have had hymnbooks. Although a very austere and proper man, he allowed her to hum or pick out on the piano any music – even popular music – on the Sabbath, kept very strictly at that time, as he told her that all music is sacred; it is the words which can make it profane.

As the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity ends, it strikes me that one of the places where we have managed to create unity among Christians is in our church music; if we leaf through the hymnal of almost any church, we find familiar pieces. Gone are the days when hymns would be rejected because they hadn't been written by a member of our particular Christian denomination. In Catholic hymnals we have songs from Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Quaker and other sources – even non-Christian. Here's a piece we all can sing together, performed by the Voices of Hope: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgL1v8FZaNM>

And, finally, from Sesame Street!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=559NU4zrh3Q>



With every blessing,

Gillian