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"We sing together (*here*), because where else can we?" Willie Sordillo Ensemble

Seriously... are there a lot of other times/places in your life besides in worship (and maybe before a ballgame) where you have the opportunity to sing with other people?

To ourselves maybe, when a word or phrase or place tweaks something in our memories and a song or tune seems to suddenly pop into our heads (and sometimes it won't let go of us and we find ourselves humming it all day!)? ...in the shower, mowing the lawn or weeding, out on your bike? Or maybe driving down the road alone when some song comes up on the radio and we can't help but sing along?

But singing together with others is a different experience isn't it, particularly in worship? You may hear the person behind or beside you... the many different kinds of voices, each unique, each an amazing creation! Some are strong and confident, some not so much; others may wander far from the tune, still others might work in harmonies; some sing high, others low, and some really low! And yet all the voices regardless of strength or pitch or shape, blend together with the acoustic qualities of this space to make a joyful noise of praise!

Described like this I can't help but see the parallel with a boat full of rowers... maybe this week it's a dragon boat in my imagination?... but a bunch of seeming misfits of all shapes, sizes, and abilities, out on the tossing sea (or lake) together, ...together Pulling for the Shore! "Pull for shore, sailor, pull for the shore. Heed not the rolling waves but bend to the oar." ...some of the English words we'll sing in a few minutes.

With the exception of a few other mammals like dolphins and whales, humans are unique in our ability to sing and use song for communication. Singing uses far more of our voice than speaking, and offers many more possible sounds than most spoken languages use. Words tied to a melody are easier to remember, and a message broadcast in song can carry much farther than when spoken. If you doubt this, picture a market or a ballgame stadium with vendors calling out what they have for sale... their sing/song hawking voices and message are easily heard above the crowd.

I think it's safe to say that unaccompanied song must have been the original music-making form, with instrumentation following later to support, mimic, and enhance it. It's been said, and I believe it: one who sings, prays twice! Song is what wells up when a culture or people lose everything else, and singing together is a way to share experiences be they of loss and grief, joy and wonder, longing or thanks.

The Gospel music tradition we love to hear and sing along with, grew out of the sin of slavery. It was an effective underground technique to learn, remember, and spread story, tradition, and information through slave communities where learning to read and write were forbidden. Slave masters allowed singing in the fields... maybe because the rhythms and beat kept work going at pace? ...maybe because the singing seemed

to be a calming influence over the oppressed masses? ...or maybe if slaves were singing they couldn't be talking and plotting?

"Wade in the Water" is a gospel spiritual you have certainly heard before and probably sung yourself, and we'll hear it again in a few minutes. It's a perfect example of how this form of communication worked. On one level it is a way of remembering the Exodus 14 story of the Israelites escaping Egypt. The "young girl dressed in red" in the first verse is Miriam dancing across the Red Sea (as our young members dramatized for us this morning), and the other children in the following verses are the rest of the Israelites dressed in white, and blue.

Now, I've always wondered about the phrase "God's gonna trouble the water" that runs through verse and chorus of this song a bit like a sub-surface river or tidal current. A couple of sources I found say it refers to a healing told in John 5:4, but when I tried to look this up in the New Revised Bible we tend to use... surprise! ...there is no John 5:4!! But, ah-ha, verse 4 was printed in a footnote as: "For an angel went down... and troubled the water: whoever stepped in... was made whole of whatever disease he had." So I presume the implication is that "troubled water" is water stirred up by the presence of God, not necessarily rough water, and wading in this water gives waders some sort of divine protection and/or healing. The same perhaps as the living water we hear about in other texts. (BTW for the curious: Apparently v4 was banished to a footnote because the writing style is incompatible with surrounding text, it's not found in the oldest manuscripts, and it only exists in Greek...so scholars conclude it is a newer addition. This is no doubt more info than you want or need to know!)

"Wade in the Water" combines in song the Red Sea story of the Israelites fleeing the enslaving rulers of Egypt, with the healing power of God's troubled water. For run-away slaves trying to escape from legally sanctioned slavery this song's words carried not only the ancient Biblical story, but also described their story too! Offering comfort, assurance, and practical knowledge, they would for example know to follow the wisdom from the song and wade in the water because it promised a measure of safety, which of course it did, because dogs set loose to chase down escapees would lose scent of them if they kept to the water of streams and rivers. Secondly, that to make good their escape to freedom they had to eventually make it across the Ohio River and out of the reach of slave-holding laws of the southern states... just like the Israelites escaping the Egyptians. This song and others like it must have reassured escapees of God's sustaining presence faced with the uncertainty and danger of the really big, wide, and fast running river in front of them.

VT UCC minister Rev. Rona Kinsley offers words of caution most of us should heed as we listen or sing gospel spirituals: "Many ...have become well-loved throughout the church, and we like singing them, too. But it would be a mistake to think that our experience is their experience. After all, in the American Exodus story, we European Americans are the Egyptians. And we cannot sing this music with integrity without also trying to understand, appreciate, and support the struggle of those who wrote it. And we cannot sing this music with integrity if we don't educate ourselves about the challenges that face African Americans today."

So in closing please enjoy the vocal group Sweet Honey in the Rock singing *"Wade in the Water"*. I think you'll find memorable. These amazing women use their whole selves to share with us something of the oppressed

experience. If the video is not easy for you to see, just close your eyes. And remember as you listen, there are no instruments... just these women blending their wonderful voices together.

May this inspire all of us to lift our voices and hearts fearlessly in song!

(www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRpzEnq14Hs)