Westminster Presbyterian Church
Des Moines, Iowa

Sunday, April 12, 2015
Psalm 133; Acts 4:32-35

"Transcending the Barriers"

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When our daughter was little, 4, 5 or 6 years old, that child could put on a pout that you guys cannot imagine. I mean that lip would all of a sudden pop out and it was an ugly thing to see. The only thing a dad could do at that time was to start to sing, "Nobody loves me. Everybody hates me. I think I will go eat worms." Then the pout would stick even further, so I would have to sing it again, "Nobody loves me. Everybody hates me. I think I will go eat worms." About the seventh time I sing this, the lip starts to quiver, she starts to giggle and then it ruins the whole pout. There is nothing that makes a 6-year-old madder than a wasted pout.

What Tina was singing about and they were playing about from that amazing Blues piece, was not about a pout: Nobody loves me, nobody seems to care. Nobody loves me, nobody seems to care wasn't about a pout. It was a primal cry of angst and alienation and loneliness. If you listen to the Blues, that is what it is: a primal scream from the belly - the deepest part of your diaphragm - a crying out in need: *Well there ain't nobody worried and there ain't nobody cryin', every day, every day I have the blues, every day blues.*

While there ain't nobody worried and there ain't nobody cryin' in what she sang, that meant that, that person felt so entirely alone; that's what causes the blues: alienation. The only way they could survive the alienation was to sing it out. When they started singing and playing it together, that was their only hope. That is how the Blues developed.

Psalm 133 is a pilgrimage Psalm I read. The pilgrims from all over the world would come to Jerusalem to have their once-in-a-lifetime relationship with God in the Temple, where God resided. But the pilgrimage wasn't like hopping on a plane, landing in Tel Aviv and taking this nice cushy charter bus to Jerusalem. People would have to walk for days, weeks and months. There wasn't a Holiday Inn or a McDonald's on every corner. When they made the trek they had to rely on the hospitality of those along the way or they would die. They would die of exposure in the desert. They would die of starvation without food. They would die of violence at the hands of robbers.

What kept them alive on their pilgrimage were the people along the way and those they were on the pilgrimage with. They would start out alone. Pretty soon somebody else who was going on the pilgrimage would join the first person, and they would walk together, because it was safer. Suddenly, they would start singing the Psalms. They would remind each other that they were not alone, they would sing to the God who would give them comfort, provide help along the way and get them safely to and from their route along the pilgrim's way.

Then suddenly they would reach Jerusalem and go into the Temple. They would sing the same songs because they were alienated no more; and they were no longer despairing or fearful, but triumphant that God had safely brought them home. It was a wonderful blessing to sing together in safety and promise.

That is the Blues. Blues is the genre of the African-American communities in the deep south at the end of the 19th century - the late 1800's. It developed with a fusion of a tradition of African music that they brought with them and European folk music; and it turned into Spirituals, work songs, field hollers, chants and shouts that we heard right here; carried out to

remind them that what they did they were not alone in doing. Even when they were in the fields picking cotton, they could endure it because somebody was enduring it with them. Maybe - perhaps God - was watching even for little me, who felt all alone and unloved.

The Spirituals brought, through the Blues, hope. The blending of the Spirituals and the Blues would go on all the way into today. The early Blues was a relating of the troubles they experienced in the hope that God would do something about it.

Now, before the Blues gained formal definition, they were to find Spirituals that were more secular, so they would sing about the things they couldn't sing about in church, which frankly I'm not going to get into behind a pulpit. But they were considered to be "low down," not only because of the kind of sleaziness of some of the lyrics but, sadly, because they were sung by rural blacks, and a lot of the African-American people who were in the urban areas looked down on the rural blacks as somehow even "less appropriate" or right. So the music came out of that and, in fact, it was considered that Blues music was so lowly - both by prejudiced whites and more affluent or urban blacks upon the rural blacks - that it got to the point where Blues was considered devil music. Out of that was a binding within the rural community of who they were and that they - at least if no one else loved them - could love each other in those communities. Their music came out of that.

The Blues was a voice for injustice, opportunity and even individuality. If you know your Blues, you know you play two bars of any 12-bar Blues song and you can tell the difference between Muddy Waters, T-Bone Walker, Etta James, Billy Holiday. I don't care who all you list, you can know their music.

One of the greatest ones was Lightning Hopkins, who was an old Country Blues player. He could pick that guitar like nobody's business. Yet, in a midst of the extreme individualism of that Blues music where you could pick out the name of the person and what they are doing so fast, there was still a community air to it. Lightning Hopkins played Country Blues. It came out of that Mississippi Delta. But Mississippi Delta music had its own music that was different and unique - that Piedmont sound.

Then you would move into the Chicago Blues as it came north and you heard horns and other things you didn't hear when all they had were like coffee-can, banjo-type music with two strings, because that is all they could afford. The Blues changed and developed, and it developed around its community, not only so others would hear it but so that they could remain connected, because they knew that alone they would die. But, connected they would have life and hope, even amidst the social injustice that they felt.

Blues sings of deep despair. But I don't care how horrible it sounds in its depression, Blues music is also about hope because they keep on singing it; hoping that something would change. The Christian faith also speaks of that singing for justice and trust in God. That's where our Spirituals came out of, that is so intimately tied to the Blues music. Every Christian knows there is alienation in their despair and need for God. So what they do is, we sing the Psalms. We sing the Spirituals together to remind us that we are not in this alone and that God will carry us on our pilgrimage through life as well.

This past week I was drinking my coffee and getting the morning going, and I was listening to one of the morning news shows. They had a wonderful story that I had to Google because I wanted to hear it more than once. It was about the famous Whitney plantation. You see the

Whitney plantation over and over in movies when they are talking about the Deep South - especially about slavery. It just reopened a few months ago as a museum; the first time one of the largest museums specifically intended to show the slave society during that time in our country. It was purchased 16 years ago by a 77-year-old man named John Cummings. He purchased it because it became available. It is an absolutely beautiful piece of property and he wanted to have the plantation. He had the money to restore it and he thought, "How cool to have this beautiful home and acre upon acre of plantation land." It has the trees that go up over the dirt drive that opens up into the plantation. Gorgeous.

But God sometimes has a different story than what you think about how you're going to live. How cool it was when he (John Cummings) was in there going through all of the different things in the house. There was some of the original furniture - the wood furniture. It had some of the original books. He was going through how much things cost - everything that was in that house. Over a period of years, he went through all of it. Now this gentleman is a white, civil lawyer there in New Orleans. As he was going through the house he was almost driven to his knees because in these books, it talked about purchasing 40 human beings at a time, and on the same line it spoke about purchasing cattle. No difference, no emotion: cattle, corn and human beings. He realized he had an injustice there, so he decided to donate the plantation to offer the slave perspective to any number of people who were willing to come and see it.

He took his own money, $8 million, and he restored the plantation, not for himself which had been his intention. No, he restored it to invite other people in. So, all of a sudden he is purchasing antiques from the period. He hires artists to make sculptures that are life- size men, women and children. He purchased the things that he didn't have and he put out the things he did have, like the manacle that went around their [the slaves'] ankles and wrists even while they went to church. They showed the housing which was no more than jail cells that were open to the wind and rain and cold and heat, sometimes housing eight or nine at a time. They couldn't all lie down at one time, so they had to take turns sleeping. It was so incredibly humbling. People started asking Mr. Cummings, as he started spending more and more money, and they began to notice, "Why is a white man involved in this?" Mr. Cummings would always respond: "Well, don't you remember? Wasn't it a white man who caused all of this?"

Mr. Cummings hired a professor of African descent to come in and go through all of the lists of names of the people from Louisiana who had been purchased. There were literally hundreds if not thousands of names. Most of them only first names because they didn't matter enough to have two names. They put them on walls throughout the plantation. It kind of looked like the Viet Nam Memorial, where it is just names that ran across the plantation, to remember those who could so easily be forgotten.

Now Mr. Cummings wanted people to leave changed, so one of the last things you see when leaving the plantation is the swamp. On it are six bronze heads that look like African slaves on sticks in the swamp, because that is where six men were beheaded over 200 years ago for a failed slave revolt. It was to remind all of the other slaves that, that is what the owner did: beheaded them and put them on sticks so the other slaves would know never to try it again.

Mr. Cummings put it back there to remind them of who we were, who we could be and who we need to be. He said, "I'm always shocked when I watch the news. You hear about an

extremist group that decapitates a French journalist and everybody wonders what kind of Barbarian could do such a thing." Mr. Cummings said, "We did it, Americans. We did it."

"Americans with white skin did that," he said.

So the reporter asked, "Do you feel guilty about that as a white person from the south?"

He said, "No. Not as long as I'm doing what I'm doing right now."

I thought that was such an interesting response.

The reporter asked, "You mean just accepting that history can make you feel better?" and he responded: "Owning it. When you own it, you can move beyond it. But we have to own who we were and who we could be, so we can own the best part of who we should and can be."

His response was that we live every day with the effects of slavery. We live with it in poverties - poverty that we see around us with illiteracy. We see it in crime and he said, "It is not going to change until one thing changes: education. That will be the way that we can find equality; when everyone has the opportunity for the same educational abilities, so they can see beyond the despair. They can see beyond nobody loving them; and seeing, hope anew."

Now, Psalm 133 was a sung cry amidst human alienation. Community was the only answer that saved the people in the Psalm. I think when you sing the Blues or you play the Blues, alienation is being sung. But that doesn't have to be where it stays. Acceptance, responding and naming, that's what the Blues does so well; naming the prejudice and the pain, and figuring out then how to get beyond it. The Blues singers do not let us ignore the problems. They sing it till we hear it. And violence can end on a domestic and global scale. It has to. We need to keep singing it in one form or another until it does. Like the slaves singing their chants, the call and response, the field hollers and the Spirituals, we need to sing and speak our support for one another.

So worship and sing for the Christian. Worship and sing in solidarity with the Jew. Worship and sing in solidarity with the Muslim. Worship and sing in solidarity with the Hindu. Worship and sing in solidarity with the Buddhist. Worship and sing in solidarity with the atheist. Worship and sing in solidarity with each and every one of us. Let God sort out who is right and wrong, It is our job to sing - all of us - the Blues and beyond. That is a living testament to Jesus' resurrection. Amen.