



Ash Wednesday Year C

Singing the Song of Our Enemy

RCL: Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

The terrible war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended in December 1995. The fighting between Serbs and Croats had set itself up along ethnic and religious lines and so deepened the divisions between the warring factions that it seemed impossible to imagine any type of peace, much less healing and reconciliation.

A Franciscan priest began a revolutionary project in early 1996. He recruited singers from across the country, people who were gifted in music. They were not necessarily professionals, but just people who were known in their towns and communities for their voices. He brought them all together, Muslims and Christians, Serbs and Croats, some literally fresh off the battlefield, and asked them to begin singing together.

But not just any songs. He asked them to sing the most traditional and well-known and deeply rooted religious songs of the Bosnian people, both Christian songs and Muslim songs.

He asked them to sing the songs of their enemies.

Some immediately understood the healing potential of the project and plunged into singing all the music, both their own songs and the songs of their enemies. Others' pain was so deep that they could not imagine singing the music that had been the battle cry of people who had shot and shelled and killed their comrades, their loved ones, their families. But even those who could not sing at first stayed in the room and listened, some of them sitting silently with tears of anger on their faces through months of rehearsals before they could voice a single note. But eventually they all sang, and the choir is still together today, still doing their reconciling work.

Today, Ash Wednesday, is the day we come to church to sing the song of our enemy. We come to church to confront our own mortality, to stare sin and death in the face and admit that they are real. We allow the abyss to approach. We quit fighting so hard against our unseen enemies that do us so much damage as we struggle to deny their reality day after day. We let ourselves be marked by the truth, the sign of the Cross in ash on our foreheads.

It's a terrible risk, what we do today. There is some primal place within us, the same place that tells us as children that if we simply don't look under the bed or in the closet at night, the monsters won't get us, that still operates today with much higher stakes. It makes us afraid to look under the bed and in the closet in our own souls, afraid to admit our sin, afraid to admit our disappointment and our lack of faith, afraid to admit our hopelessness and our fear of death. We hide that secret place within us even from ourselves, ashamed to admit most of what lives there.

But Jesus goes directly to that place in our gospel today. He tells us, "Whenever you pray... pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." We are asked to come out into the open by going deep inside ourselves. Jesus said the Kingdom of God is within us, and here we're being asked to find that kingdom in the least likely of places, the places we try to hide from God and from ourselves. What are the habits you can't kick that you're most ashamed of? What are the qualities about yourself you hate the most? What are the actions you've taken that you most regret?

We must go to the secret places of ourselves and not just open and slam the door shut again, but stay there and pray to the Father. Because Jesus didn't say, "Your Father will condescend to visit this awful place inside you." He said, "Your Father who *is* in secret." This, in the desolate place within us that we resist, is where the Father makes his home. And today, Ash Wednesday, we come to church and the liturgy marks out the path for us to go deeply into that country inside ourselves, the first steps into the wilderness of sin and death that lead to the Cross and eventually to the resurrection.

"See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" Paul says in our lesson from Second Corinthians. As much as we may realize the life-changing potential of going deep into the secret places within us, it never seems like it's possible now. We'll pay more attention to our prayer life when the economy settles down, when our parents get settled in the retirement community, when the kids move out, when things are less hectic at work. When things are easier, different, somehow not like today.

But that day never comes. If we wait until our voices are ready before we sing the song of our enemy, we will remain silent forever. And the deep grace of looking sin and shame and death in the face will never be available to us. "Now is the acceptable time," Paul says, "now is the day of salvation." And it is clear from the rest of the reading that Paul and his companions certainly didn't have their lives on track when he wrote this. They were dealing with beatings, imprisonments, riots, sleepless nights, and hunger. The difference between Paul and his friends and us is that they allowed the crisis and upheaval to drive them deeper into God's embrace. As our busyness and distraction and even suffering increase, we are all too prone to stay on the outer circle of relationship with God, clinging to some imagined self-sufficiency that we think keeps us afloat.

What made it possible for the Serb-Croat choir to sing the songs of their enemies? What made it possible for Paul and his companions to sing in their prison cells, even as their chains weighed them down? They accepted the full reality of the pain and death that they had walked through, while also realizing that within their deepest hearts lay a place that could never be invaded or imprisoned or harmed. That is the place

Jesus was talking about when he spoke of “your Father who is in secret.” It is the spark of the Holy Spirit that shines forth within you and can never be dimmed by sin or suffering.

So what enemy’s song will you sing today, on this Ash Wednesday? And whom do you need to invite to join your choir? Who in your life has harmed you? Whom have you harmed? What chance is there that beautiful music of hope and new life and possibility could arise out of the ashes of grief and misunderstanding that mark your past? That sense of longing you sometimes feel deep inside you—for love, for life, for light—that is the music of God yearning to come through you to bless the world. And the world needs your voice, needs your music, needs your hope. If we are ever to escape eternally labeling each other as enemies, we must be brave enough to sing together.

Today we come to church to confront sin, death, mortality, because we know in the end they hold no power over us. Today we come to church to sing the song of our enemy, only to find that we are not alone, because the Father is singing it with us.

The Rev. Whitney Rice is an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Indianapolis and currently the Associate Rector at St. Francis In-The-Fields Episcopal Church in Zionsville, Indiana. A native of Lee’s Summit, Missouri, she comes to ordained ministry by way of the University of Kansas and Yale Divinity School, where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She created and leads workshops and retreats such as Evangelism With Integrity, Sacred Body, Senior VBS, and Questions of Jesus. See www.thehiveapiary.com and www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com for more of her work.