

**Sermon: August 3, 2014 – Folk Festival Sunday. Rom 9: 1-5, Gen. 32  
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore, AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

For those of you who were here on Folk Festival Sunday last year, a chunk of today's sermon is going to sound familiar, and for good reason. First, because there is such a strong connection between the transformative power of music, and our Christian call to be people of peace and justice, I may well preach something along this line each year on Folk Festival Sunday. And second, as many of you know there have been profound changes in 2014 within the family I grew up in, and I wish to honour the people whose relationship with music has influenced me greatly.

On this weekend when we are surrounded by music, my first shout-out is to my Mom, Jean, who died on February 24<sup>th</sup> of this year. The suburban Regina household I grew up in was seldom silent. In addition to nearly ubiquitous pop music on the radio, my mom loved to play the piano, so I can still hear songs from the 30s and 40s playing in the deep recesses of my mind, songs like "My Dreams are getting better all the time," "For me and my gal," "It seems to me I've heard that song before" and "You made me love you, I didn't want to do it". Dad had a nice baritone voice and would sometimes sing while Mom played, and he enjoyed sacred music by soloists like Tennessee Ernie Ford and George Beverly Shea, but it was Mom's piano playing that was the main soundtrack of my growing-up years, which opened me to the other forms of music that would follow. (And by the way, if any of you know anyone in Regina in need of a well-worn piano, just let me know, I'm certain we could work something out.)

My second shout-out, and more to the point of a folk festival, is to my big brother, Herb, who died suddenly of a coronary on May 30<sup>th</sup> of this year. Herb, 11 years older than me, was a true audiophile. One of my earliest memories as a child was going to the record store with my big brother as he purchased yet another 45, so as a 3 and 4 year old I knew all the songs of the Beatles, the Dave Clark 5, Jan and Dean and the Beach Boys. But when I was about 7 years old, and my brother moved from high school to university, his tastes matured from 45s to LPs, so did mine, and the pop music of the early 60s was supplanted by folk music and protest songs.

I grew up in a Christian home and my parents and our Church did their best to instill positive values in me, but as I look back on it, much of what I held most deeply at an early age came from my big brother's music, not from the moral stories of Sunday School. The stories about little Jimmy going to Church and being kind to the other children were all well and good, but if you wanted to know what I stood for, I yearned for "the Hammer of Justice.. the bell of Freedom...[and] the song about love between my brothers and my sisters, all over this land". The times, they were a'changin', and as a young child immersed in the music and direct political involvement of my teenaged brother, I was aware of the winds of change long before most of my contemporaries.

If I were to add a third shout-out this morning, it would be to Pete Seeger, one of the voices I first heard through both my brother and my parents. No, Pete Seeger was not related to me in any way but he died a month before my mom, on January 27<sup>th</sup> of this year, so now's the time to remember one of my musical heroes if I'm ever going to do it. Pete's banjo had the following words inscribed on it: "this machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender" and that is precisely the bridge between the power of music, and the expression of our deepest desires for a world in which peace and love and generosity and compassion replace aggression and fearful hatred and self-indulgence and indifference.

In the four decades since I first heard this music, I've spent a lot of time pondering the changes it brought about. Most of the music, at least as I recall from childhood, had the same basic demand for peace – from Barry McGuire growling out his warning about the insanity of war in the song, "The Eve of Destruction", to Moms Mabley grieving the loss of proponents of peace in "Abraham, Martin and John," to the Youngbloods imploring us at a personal level, "C'mon people now, Smile on your brother Ev'rybody get together Try and love one another right now." Some of the songs were calls for individuals to change their hearts and their actions, some pushed for quicker changes in light of the Civil Rights act of 1964, a few were already picking up on environmental themes, many were directly anti-war, and a good number expressed the dissatisfaction of "the Man" holding power over the economic and social realities of the nation and the world. But all of them, in some way, looked at the way things were, and called for change.

Some things have changed. I definitely see more openness to diversity within the current generation of young adults that was the case when I was that age, but I also see a world where the portion of the world's resources I am entitled to consume as a North American is ridiculously more than if I were living my life on the African continent. At the same time that I am encouraged by some aspects of peace and justice that are more widespread than they had been, I am also acutely aware of how unwilling I am, as a person living in first-world comfort, to make any substantial sacrifices to help the world take the next steps toward equity and equality.

And at this point, I want to bring in today's reading from the book of Romans, for the kind of struggle that Paul is expressing in this reading strikes me as extremely similar to the struggle that many of us have relative to our beliefs. Paul, as we know, was a tremendous evangelist of the early Church, establishing countless churches around the Mediterranean, and sending letters that helped to troubleshoot the all too human problems that these religious communities were experiencing. You will also recall that before his work as a Christian missionary, Paul was a Jewish religious zealot, actively persecuting anyone who strayed from that faith to embrace the teachings of Jesus.

In today's reading, Paul is agonizing over this. He still loves his Jewish roots, and wants to honour them even as he gives himself 100% to Christ Jesus. He believes that the change God has enacted through Jesus can be THE pivotal change in history, and yet he does not want to dismiss his religious roots. He wants to endorse the importance of what God has done through the unfolding story of Israel, without getting caught in a spiritual inertia that keeps him or anyone else from embracing the changes inaugurated by Jesus Christ, Lord of All.

Finding oneself in the midst of spiritual struggle has a long, long tradition in our Judaeo-Christian tradition. In our other scripture reading, we meet Jacob, who had extracted the birthright from his brother Esau and since then has stayed far, far away from his brother. Now returning home, he is rightfully worried as to how he'll be received... and in the middle of the night is confronted by a heavenly visitor. They wrestle – not just in a dream, but an actual physical struggle – and at the end of it all the stranger with whom he wrestled declared, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel” (which means, the one who strives with God), “for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” While Jacob went his own way, fear ruled the day, but life took new shape once he struggled with God.

On the one hand Paul sees the wisdom of the ages, God's fidelity expressed throughout the course of history. On the other hand are the shortfalls of the way things are, and an urgency to change things so that people on the margins can be included in a new and far-reaching way. He wants there to be a way that avoids the pain of having to choose a new way over all the good that still resides in the old way, but finds there is nothing easy about it. Jacob, meanwhile, was caught between his fear of what would happen if he returned home to his brother, and a need to move forward in life, and the only way to get where he needed to go was to be confronted by God. What both Paul and Jacob found, is that God is to be found in the midst of the questions – when we struggle with the Divine, we gain life.

And so it is in our day. As we seek to disentangle ourselves from materialism and religious pride and an overall sense of entitlement, and truly work for a world where all people will have what they need, we learn about ourselves – and our motives – and our desire for sameness and safety. We are concerned about climate change, but we travel a lot and like to travel a lot. We want to build stronger relationships with first nations, but our land titles are not up for negotiation. We are outraged when we hear how much of the world's wealth is held by the wealthiest 1%, but we keep buying their stuff and supporting our neighbours. And as long as we remain willing to engage in that struggle, we will find God there, too.

Folk Music has changed a lot in the past 50 years – I'm not sure if the themes of social change are as central now as they were then - but something that has not changed in those five decades is my thankfulness for the role of that music in my faith development. Thinking back on it, I now realize that through the power of music, I was able to internalize, at a very early age, concepts that I could not possibly have understood at any rational level. Certain kinds of abstract thinking and the drawing of lateral connections don't usually happen until a child is between 11 and 14 years of age, but the power of

music had me asking important questions long, long before I hit that threshold. “How many roads must a man walk down before you can call him a man? How many times must the cannon balls fly before they’re forever banned? How many years can some people exist before they’re allowed to be free? How many times can a man turn his head pretending he just doesn’t see?”

As a child, I didn’t necessarily know the answers, but Bob Dylan gave me the questions, and trusted that I would learn the answers eventually. I felt honoured by that then, and now: the sense that I am entrusted, not with a collection of correct answers, but with the task of seeking what comes next and getting together with others to make it happen. That willingness to engage in the questions is what The United Church of Canada is all about when we are at our best – encouraging anyone who is considering what it would mean to follow Jesus, to really engage the world and dig deep on how we fit in to the whole picture. As a denomination, we do not pretend to have pat answers but we do believe that God is intrinsically connected to the questions, and to those who are brave enough to ask the questions. If I have a lament to offer in the midst of all this, is the fact that there are many people out there deeply involved in making the world a better place, for whom the Church is seen as being on the other side of things. I pray that someday, the secular peace and justice movement and progressive Churches will come back together in ways that acknowledge the necessity of struggle, the power of community, and the existence of a realm beyond what we see that urges us forward.

Change is not easy. There are good things about where we are, how we live right now. We may find that it feels disloyal to those who went before us to want to radically change what they worked so hard to build. But God is found in the midst of life-giving change, in the midst of questions, in the midst of protest against injustice. May the presence of God in all this truly be a song in your heart, that supports and inspires you to get involved or stay involved in striving for peace and justice. And may this song that moves you forward, draw you close to the song of the ages, that is to be heard in the very heart of God. Amen.

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Seeger, Pete and Hays, Lee. “If I had a hammer.”

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For more about Pete Seeger, see <http://www.thenation.com/blog/178113/pete-seeger-man-surrounded-hate-and-forced-it-surrender>

For a reminder of many forgotten “protest songs,” follow the links at

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_1960s\\_one-hit\\_wonders\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_1960s_one-hit_wonders_in_the_United_States)

For more about who controls how much of the economy, see

[http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2011/10/occupy\\_wall\\_street\\_says\\_the\\_top\\_one\\_per\\_cent\\_of\\_americans\\_have\\_.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/business/moneybox/2011/10/occupy_wall_street_says_the_top_one_per_cent_of_americans_have_.html)

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