“When in Our Music God is Glorified” - Stephanie Sorge, 6.23.24

I was part of an ordination service a number of years ago in which the pastor giving the charge to the newly ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament opened by saying, “If I knew someone who liked to do cross stitch, I might commission them to put this on a pillow.” I sat back and pictured this pillow in my head, which got bigger, and bigger, and bigger as the quote he read continued for about five minutes. I am sure it was a wonderful quote full of deep wisdom, but all I remember is the expanding pillow, and imagining the poor cross-stitch volunteer, imaginary though they may be.

Brevity is the friend of any slogan, bumper sticker, banner, t-shirt, sticker, or cross-stitched pillow. Throw in some levity and you’ve got a real winner. Last week in our discussion of David LaMotte’s book, we were invited to come up with our own bumper sticker slogans. Maybe that’s why I’ve had banners on my mind.

This passage from Colossians might be too much for a t-shirt, and certainly for a bumper sticker, but the essence is distilled in this verse: “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Work uniforms denote a particular profession, sweatshirts declare loyalty to a school or sports team, and t-shirts communicate, well, any number of things. The church is admonished to live in such a way that our humility, compassion, and love are as plain as the clothes on our back, identifying us with the one who we follow. We don’t need a WWJD shirt if we are actually doing WJWD.

We are living in heated times - and not just because of global warming. Passions run hot on all sides. It’s easy for us to quickly find ourselves in the camps whose banners most closely match our own, and banners are everywhere. Banners and flags go back at least to the 11th century BCE.[[1]](#footnote-1) Back then, and for much of history, flags and banners were used to identify powerful groups - military units, ruling dynasties, powerful families, etc. A few thousand years later, we’re still identifying ourselves and rallying power under a variety of banners. There are all the political signs, of course. Huge barn paintings that haven’t changed for a couple of election cycles, flags, posters, shirts, buttons, baseball caps, and bumper stickers - there are so many ways for us to proclaim who we are, and for us to make just as quick judgments about who others are.

That’s not all bad. I love that when people enter from the parking lot, most walk under the sign that proclaims, with bright rainbows, “You are loved.” I love this “Welcome” banner that Rebekah Nolt made for us, early in their preparation for ministry. I love the rainbow hanging up here, and the one on the table - made by Rebekah and Amy for our Pride table years ago. I love these banners and other signs we’ve had in our yard - all of which boil down to one simple message: whoever you are, God loves you, and delights in you, just as you are. It’s a message we need to share loudly and proudly, because too many people have heard otherwise, especially from the church. Banners can be important. They may even save lives.

Speaking of flags and saving lives, I strongly recommend looking up the video of Jonathan Groff’s Tony Award acceptance speech from last week, marked by both brevity and levity. To his family, seated in the audience, he said: “Thank you for always allowing my freak flag to fly without ever making me feel weird about it. Even if they didn't always understand me, my family knew the life-saving power of fanning the flame of a young person's passions without judgment… [Musical] theater is still saving my soul.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Music has the power to move us in ways that words alone cannot. It has the potential to unite us across differences, to open our minds and hearts to hear in harmonies what we might not listen to in speech. George C. Wolfe grew up gay and Black in the 50s and 60s in Frankfort, Kentucky. At age 15, he took a life-changing trip to New York City with his mother, during which they saw a number of plays and musicals. Last Sunday night, he received a Lifetime Achievement Award. In his acceptance speech, he also expressed appreciation to his parents, who supported and affirmed him. He said, “they also told me that I had a responsibility to honor the culture that I come from and to join other cultures and connect with them, so I could learn early on that it didn’t need to look like you to be about you.” Speaking to our current context, he continued “as we go through this incredibly complicated time, it’s very important that we approach it not with fear, not with trepidation, but knowing that we work with the dynamic of celebrating and exploring the powerful, fragile dynamic that is the human heart.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Clothe yourselves with love. Wear the banner of love. Above all other flags, fly the flag of love. And don’t forget to sing! Harmony brings together disparate parts into one whole. A simple tune can be beautiful, but harmony makes it come alive.

What happens when a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim walk into a jam session? They become Abraham Jam. David LaMotte is one-third of that group. At the bottom of their logo is the equation: (show slide with sticker/logo): Harmony > Unity. If we’re trying to sing in harmony, we have to listen to each other. If we want to work in harmony, we have to respect what different people bring to the table. It’s a pretty good metaphor for being church. But who gets to pick the music?

This week, Lizzy Healy and I will join hundreds of other delegates and commissioners to the 226th General Assembly. In some ways, that’s what General Assembly does - it selects the music we’ll sing together over the coming years. General Assembly is us. People. Presbyteries and other entities strive for diversity when electing commissioners and advisory delegates. Together, we will pray for and lean on the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to guide us in our deliberations and votes. At the end of the day, we’re going to end up with a set list that won’t make everyone happy, but those of us who will be there will have had the experience of practicing the harmonies together.

Our spaces of public discourse are so polarized. Social media and news outlets make it easy for us to live in echo chambers. The church can’t be that kind of an echo chamber if we’re going to be church. We need to learn how to harmonize.

Some General Assemblies have been incredibly heated and contentious, others less so. It’s because the work we do is important, and relevant, and it elicits many conflicting passions. Those passions reflect hopes and fears that, at their core, aren’t that different between the sides. As a denomination, we’ve valued creating a big tent, with room for many different voices and perspectives. We’ve rejected most litmus tests, and affirmed that God alone is Lord of the conscience. There will be signs and buttons and banners representing different perspectives. Is there room for them all? I think there is a litmus test, given in this passage from Colossians and elsewhere, and that is the test of love. Everything else has to fit within that clothing, under that banner, ready to wave that flag.

Whatever songs come out of the next few weeks, we’ll be searching for the harmonies together. If our songs break free from the fear and trepidation that plague so much public discourse, if they lift up a diversity of voices and perspectives that are grounded in love, then we will make some beautiful harmonies, and in our music God will be glorified.

Pray for us. Pray that as General Assembly gathers, the one banner we will carry is love. Pray that we will come back better singers - perhaps literally and figuratively - as we bring back new songs of justice, peace, and love, and pray that the whole church will be inspired and enlivened to work towards that vision. May it be so!

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\_of\_flags [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Culture/tony-awards-read-jonathan-groffs-inspiring-speech-after/story?id=111190130 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Recap-the-2024-Tony-Awards-Acceptance-Speeches-20240616 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)