

# **MY REPERTOIRE:HYMNS TO STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH**

## **3. “This Is My Song”**

**Matthew 5:1-11**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

**The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet**

**October 1, 2017 - World Communion Sunday**

---

If you have been away from Market Square in recent weeks - perhaps a trip to some exotic resort or cruising the high seas or savoring a sunny September at the seashore or paying your respects to the local golf course, you may not know we are in the middle of a sermon series I am calling, “My Repertoire: Hymns to Strengthen Our Faith.” Each of the seven sermons in the series reveals one of my favorite hymns for which I had a propensity to rotate repeatedly in worship when I was choosing the hymns. For the sake of us all, I mostly have turned that responsibility over to our Minister of Music!

I have a suspicion that if we were to develop a “Market Square repertoire” of the congregation’s seven favorite hymns, today’s hymn from my repertoire - “This Is My Song” - would make the church’s list, too. Every time we sing this hymn I get notes from members telling me how much they love it or are moved by it or inspired. One person said to me, “Whenever I find myself losing hope for the world, this hymn somehow restores it.” I received an email note last night from Jim and Sandy Jones in Iceland who saw a post about today’s service on Facebook and wrote, “It’s one of our most favorite hymns. So sorry we will not be there to join in the singing.” And from my vantage point here at the front of the sanctuary, I even have spotted a few glistening eyes whenever we sing it.

On a Sunday on which the Christian church celebrates world communion, our hymn is apropos of the grace and empathy required to build a world of harmony and hope. Amid a world of many differences, our hymn makes clear that recognizing and honoring the experiences and feelings we share in common with others is a most significant portal into peace.

The music for our hymn was written by Jean Sibelius in 1899. Originally it was part of a symphony<sup>1</sup> performed to accompany a series of tableaux reflecting parts of Finnish history. From agitated and tumultuous music at the beginning of the symphony symbolizing the historical struggles of the Finnish people, the symphony finally resolves into the more irenic music of our hymn we know as FINLANDIA.

A young man by the name of Lloyd Stone wrote the text of the first two stanzas of the hymn in 1934 when he was twenty-two years old. Stone attended the University of Southern California as a music major intending to become a public school teacher. He got waylaid, though, and joined instead a circus bound for Hawaii and lived there for the rest of his life writing poems and enjoying the islands. He wrote “This Is My Song” during the brief period of peace between the two World Wars and while expressing affection for his own country, he acknowledged that other people in other countries have similar sentiments about theirs.

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
but other hearts in other lands are beating  
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

We need Stone’s big-heartedness and generosity in our world today. We need it in our relationships between nations and peoples. One of the problems of the “America first” ideology being promulgated these days and claims to American exceptionalism<sup>2</sup> and actions justified by the political imperative of “the national interest” is that they all are too small and do not serve the causes of peace and partnership. The same is true of any nation tethered to the politics and polemics of specialness and entitlement. They build dividing walls of hostility<sup>3</sup> and are barriers and not bridges to mutuality.

I recall, nearly forty years later, the now deceased minister of the Riverside Church in the City of New York - the Reverend Dr. William Sloane Coffin - preaching a sermon he called “And Pray for Iranians, Too.” (Ah, my next sermon series: Seven Sermon Titles I’ve Never Forgotten!) It was during the Iranian hostage crisis after Coffin and two other clergymen had been invited by the Iranian Foreign Ministry to celebrate Christmas with the 52 American hostages being held in

---

<sup>1</sup> Finlandia, Opus 26 by Jean Sibelius

<sup>2</sup> Scholars Timothy Roberts and Lindsay DiCuirci, editors of American Exceptionalism (2013, volume 1, p.9) claim that since the United States has retained class-based and race-based differences, as well as imperialis, and a willingness to wage war, claims to exceptionalism are nullified.

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:14

Tehran. Emotions were charged and visceral when Coffin preached his sermon that has been for me ever since a clarion call to enlarge my heart, my love, and my circle of compassion to include those beyond my own instinctual inclinations.

In his sermon, Coffin said, “Patriotism is a wonderful thing but it must be based on morality and not defined by the needs of a militant unity.” “For what is the virtue of unity,” he asked, “if it is unity in folly?”<sup>4</sup> “Rather than rally around the flag,” he said to his Riverside congregation on the Sunday before Christmas, “let us gather around the Holy Child.”<sup>5</sup> Later in his sermon, and remembering that the hostage crisis occurred in the aftermath of the nearly forty-year reign of the Shah of Iran who had been propped up by our government but who mostly was despised in Iran, Coffin said, “Even though I am an American, I can appreciate that to Iranians, their holding of my brother and sister Americans reflects decades of pain and anger. We scream about the hostages but few Americans heard the screams of tortured Iranians”<sup>6</sup> who had and have their own aspirations and desires for their lives as we do ours.

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.  
This is my home, the country where my heart is;  
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;  
but other hearts in other lands are beating  
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.*

No longer can we afford enmity, acrimony, and division between nations if indeed we ever could because the paramount problems in today’s world truly are *inter*-national. They belong to all nations, to all of us together. The calamitous effects of climate change know no boundaries. Fresh water sustainability and sufficiency are not the worry of any one country but all countries. Consequences of nuclear war cannot be limited only to warring factions but would be globally disastrous. Hunger and poverty occur in every land. Human rights are every human’s right and to avert our eyes and concern from the violation of them is an abrogation of our membership in the human family.

People of other nations are not just Canadians or Mexicans or Africans or Palestinians or Israelis or Venezuelans. They are not just nameless and faceless groups of people. They are not just Jews or Muslims or Christians or Buddhists or Taoists. They are individual human beings the same as we are who experience similar hurts and hopes and yearnings. They love their children

---

<sup>4</sup> William Sloane Coffin in a sermon preached at the Riverside Church in the City of New York on December 23, 1979.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

as much as we love ours. They have job anxieties and health concerns like we do. They enjoy art and beauty and poetry and music, too.

St. Paul cautioned the members of the Philippian church “not to look after their own interests but to the interests of others.”<sup>7</sup> That is as true for nations as it is for churches as it is for individuals. In the long run, attending to the interests and well-being of others serves our own interests and well-being though that is the happy consequence and not the motivation for doing so. We experience it in our own lives. We are much more receptive to those who want to help us than to those who want to hurt us or use us. We like relationships and partnerships that are honest and mutually beneficial. How did we ever come to believe that life in the world centers around us, that American dreams, desires, and goals matter more than the dreams, desires, and goals of people of other nations? How did we ever come to believe that privilege is our birthright more than others?

*This is my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

“O God of all the nations...” To harbor thoughts that God favors our nation over others or that we have some innate or inherent worthiness more or better than other nations and people is thin thinking lacking substance and depth. Witness Preacher Peter in Acts 10:34 - “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” Or Preacher Paul in Romans 2:11 - “God shows no partiality.” And Preacher Jesus in John 3:16 - “God so loves the world...”

Beyond and behind their governments, people everywhere share a common longing for peace and prosperity. They want their families to flourish and their children to thrive as much as we do ours. People of every nation seek good lives as certainly as we do here. People of all nations cherish the beauty of their land that is of God or, to adapt John Calvin’s description of the world, “The nations, all of them, are theaters of God’s glory.”

*My country’s skies are bluer than the ocean,  
and sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.  
But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,  
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.  
So hear my song, O God of all the nations,  
a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

---

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:4

The final stanza of our hymn can be problematic without some theological commentary. This stanza was not written by Lloyd Stone but by a theology professor named Georgia Harkness and added later. She appears to have Christianized our hymn that otherwise was accessible to people of all religions and nations. By doing so, Harkness seems to set the last stanza of the hymn against the first two. These are her words:

*This is my prayer, O Lord of all earth's kingdoms;  
thy kingdom come; on earth thy will be done.  
Let Christ be lifted up till all shall serve him,  
And hearts united learn to live as one.*

It is good and right for Christians to lift up Christ in our lives and to live in the world in the manner of Jesus the Christ in our day. That is the Christian call on our lives. We Christians know Christ best in the person of Jesus whom we worship and serve. To assert, however, that all, that everyone in the world, must serve Christ *Jesus* will get pushback from those who are not Christians. So there must be another way to understand Professor Harkness' text.

If we can agree that for Christians to say "*Jesus Christ*" does not preclude Christ from taking other sacred forms, personages, and names in other religions and cultures, then the last verse remains consistent with the earlier two. Otherwise, the last stanza takes back what the first two verses give. But when we allow our understanding of the Christ to be as big as the world, the universal and cosmic Christ, that wherever and in whomever love and justice, mercy, hope, and peacemaking are practiced in whatever form and guise, *there* is Christ, then Christ becomes a source of unity and we can learn to live as one. That, I believe, is the deep meaning of Christ in our Holy Scripture and in our hymn.

When Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God,*" he was inclusive of everyone regardless of creed or country whose work and worship, passion and practice, serve the premise, promise, and promotion of peace among the nations and in every human heart. That, after all, is the real meaning of world communion, isn't it?!

*So hear my prayer, O God of all the nations:  
Myself I give thee; let thy will be done.*

Amen.

