

Sermon Proper 17B Aug 30/15 Aurora

My mother was a great fan of operetta. Thanks to Hollywood films, she saw many of them starring Jeanette MacDonald. Mom, in her younger days, actually looked a bit like the soprano movie star. Although not classically trained as a singer as was Jeanette, mom had a nice voice and did sing in an all-women choir that did some touring. "Kalina" was the name of the group, which is a popular name in Polish referring to a flowering tree. They once sang at Radio City Music Hall in NYC.

In the 1937 movie "Firefly" the song "Donkey Serenade" was a tremendous hit sung by Alan Jones to the coy Jeanette. Mom used to sing it quietly, almost unconsciously, while puttering around the house. The opening words have stuck with me all these years later and came to mind this morning when we sang many of our favorite hymns as the prelude to our worship.

These were those words, "There's a song in the air.."

What an absolutely great thought! Song, it fills the air, Song, it brings joy, Song, it lifts the weary heart, Song, it thrills the soul.

Did you know that there are three official books in the Episcopal Church which contain all things necessary for Salvation (to borrow a phrase). Of course, the Holy Bible, next the Book of Common Prayer and yes, our songbook the Hymnal. (Nowadays some might say we also need to add some kind of recognition to the Internet and websites, but that's another matter.)

Do you remember the saying, "Music has charms to soothe the savage beast?" Actually the phrase was coined by William Congreve, in *The Mourning Bride*, 1697:

Music has Charms to soothe a savage Beast,  
To soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak.  
I've read, that things inanimate have mov'd,  
And, as with living Souls, have been inform'd...

When we sing hymns and sacred songs, we are actually praying. They are not for our entertainment but for our edification and education. Even if you can't carry a tune, everyone ought to open the hymnal and look at the music, so reading words that are teaching us as well as praising God. St. Augustine once said, "He who sings prays twice."

Poetry and prose, set to music, elevate our thoughts with beautiful words and tunes. Amazingly, we often can remember their meaning because we can recall the song and its words. I find that when singing I become totally engrossed in it and my mind sets aside all the concerns and worries that besiege me. For those few minutes I am doing an important thing, praising God, lifting my voice with the voices of many others, connecting with them and joining with them in a profound act of worship.

The sounds and the words that come out of us convey the essence of our thinking and believing. No one can read our minds; no one can know the secrets of our hearts, except for our just and loving God.

Jesus in today's Gospel reading is teaching the underlying truth about the process that goes on when we express ourselves in words, actions and deeds. He says, "But it is the things which come out of a person which may render one corrupt. ...What comes out of a person, that is what renders the someone either good and righteous or foul and evil."

We humans can be good or evil. Shakespeare put it so well: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an Angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals!"

But we do not have to look much beyond the nightly news to see how far in the other direction humans can go. Murder, violence, lies, cheating, both individually or in groups. Even in families there can be strife, bickering, rumor mongering, and assassination of character. And sadly it can even happen in a church congregation!

In our first reading we heard of the beauty of the voice of the beloved. Leaping, bounding, gazing in loving awe. Could that be our human spirit at its best, or even the calling of God to join in "the time of singing" saying "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away."

Then in the second reading are the destructive behaviors in a list all too familiar: anger, sordidness, rank growth of wickedness, the unbridled tongues which harm the community with rumor, judgment, and division.

Jesus calls out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, indeed something in all of us, as people who observe the rules and regulations, but not the spirit of the law. Who in their hearts and thoughts put down and judge others but are blind to the flaws of their own.

Jesus knows well that it is not enough to say and do the right things in front of others, while full of envy and jealousy and concealed bitterness and pride. One may be meticulously serving God in outward things, and bluntly disobeying God in inward things — and that is hypocrisy.

What is the antidote for these dark things? Sadly, they are always lurking in the dark corners of our minds. As we evolved from lower lifeforms, we retained instincts and behaviors that appear at times out of nowhere. Survival is still an eternal quest; fight or flight is an example.

By the grace of God, we are able to resist these thoughts and temptations. If we but fill our hearts and minds, our activities and deeds fully with that which is good, serving the needs of others, caring for those in distress, we will find mercy and help in time of need.

Most of us have a conscience which whispers to us what is right and what is wrong. It is there that we often find the very voice of Jesus telling us what he would do. And our response is to do likewise and keep ourselves unstained by the world. Amen.