

## Together in Hope

Grace and peace in the name of God the Holy Spirit, manifest in each of us for the common good. Amen.

The Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, one of Rome's four ancient, papal, major basilicas, was originally consecrated in the year 324 over the site where the Apostle Paul is thought to be buried. The basilica in its current grandeur was completed in 1840, after a millennium and a half of adapting and rebuilding rendered necessary by natural and human-made disasters. You enter the basilica through the gates of a courtyard squared in by double rows of marble columns. In the center of the courtyard, you pass the foot of a larger-than-lifesize statue of Paul, hooded, holding a sword. Four perfectly fabulous palm trees punctuate this space with *joie de vivre* and glow vibrantly green against the azure blue Italian sky. Inside, the nave of the basilica, 432 feet in length, is arrayed in brooding stone columns. The windows on the side walls are made of translucent alabaster. 80 massive columns hold up the ceiling, which is lofted and adorned in unimaginable opulence. Being in this space transports you to some distantly-imagined realm of heaven where you, in your infinitesimal breathlessness, become part of the great symphony of it all.

In today's gospel, Jesus returns to Nazareth, where he was brought up as a child. This event directly follows his temptation in the wilderness by Satan in the first eleven verses of this chapter. The Spirit shows up there first, at the beginning of the chapter, where they lead Jesus in the wilderness. So, too, Spirit grips Jesus here and sends him from the wilderness to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. People know Jesus here. It's that home space where identity is so known, so beloved, but also maybe prescribed, entrenched, or stuck. He preaches in the synagogues with aplomb. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah and people are mesmerized. And by deeming these prophetic words fulfilled, he gives credit where credit is due, to the Holy Spirit, who has been upon him and inspiring these deeds, and who has been inspiring prophetic words before and after him in the life of God's people. Rooted in the Holy Spirit, Christ owns the boldness of his purpose. "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He stands firm in his own beloved identity. \*

Some of you may remember that I traveled to Rome in the fall as part of a choral ministry project. The project was called Together in Hope, and was envisioned and birthed by a married couple, Gary and Celia, who are lifelong Lutherans. Together in Hope was intended to advocate for Christian Unity, particularly Catholic and Protestant unity, through singing. Gary and Celia began their work on this project around the time the Lutheran church was celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. They selected and assembled texts from Catholic and Protestant sources, most of which focused very specifically on the Holy Spirit. Many lines from today's Corinthians reading and last week's Corinthians reading were used. Gary and Celia commissioned two new works for choir and orchestra - "Holy Spirit Mass" and "So That the World may believe" - to be performed in Rome at the International Festival of Sacred Music. The choir would also sing for and personally meet Pope Francis on the steps of St. Peter's, sing for All Saints Day mass at the Vatican, and get the extremely rare opportunity to sing inside the Sistine Chapel. The choir embodied ecumenism - comprised of about a third Catholic folks, a third Protestant folks, and a third unaffiliated folks. The group was co-conducted (another intentional effort to make the work of the group ecumenical) by Mark Stover, a young Lutheran conductor who I went to grad school with, and Teri Larson, the long-time director of music at the Basilica of St. Mary downtown and a devoted Catholic woman. The composer of our music was Kim André Arnesen, who is a

fabulous, sweet Norwegian millennial with a gentle spirit and a gift for crafting music that is artful but not overwrought. It's music that seems familiar, that speaks to our heart - our shared heart.

Kim, the composer, accompanied us throughout our week in Rome, sitting in quietly on our rehearsals, and gently giving feedback when the conductors invited it. At one point, he reflected for us on the heart of the matter, on his theological understanding of music. He quoted the gospel of Matthew chapter six - "When you pray, go into your room, close the door, and pray to God, who is unseen..." We all have inner rooms, secret places, he said. And any work for unity and reconciliation begins within these inner rooms. And music, Kim reflected, invites us into our inner rooms.

We wear the name Lutheran, convicted in our beliefs, but we can still understand that, as with most large-scale human conflict, the Reformation left a complicated wound. It still festers, 501 years later, as misunderstanding between different Christian denominations walls the body of Christ from communing with one another and from understanding and accepting one another. This was the spirit of the project - to bring healing and reconciliation to this continuing conflict. And what better balm for this wound than music. And what better destination for this work than Rome, the very center of the Catholic Church, where men in their halls of power bear tremendous influence on spiritual culture and human action.

I will confess before you that I struggled pretty intensely in the rehearsal process for this project. And although I ended up having a profound experience alongside this group, it began for me in quite a bit of turmoil.

I am a gay man. It is through the *Protestant* church that I have come to understand my belovedness in the eyes of God. The Catholic Church to this day labels homosexual acts as "intrinsically immoral" and the homosexual person to be "objectively disordered." The Catholic church does not consider the "inclination" toward homosexuality in itself sinful, but it sees the queer person living fully as very wrong. In recent decades, Catholic laity in particular have worked to widen the embrace of queer folks in Catholic community, but the stance of the church remains unchanged in this regard. This doctrine hurts me very deeply, and for this reason I have avoided the Catholic Church and most who identify as practicing Catholics.

In the weeks of rehearsal preceding our trip to Rome, I carried at times searing resentment for those Catholics around me. I felt judged and misunderstood and boxed in. Many of the Catholic folks around me probably actively disagree with the stance of their church, but it is hard for someone like me to get past the cognitive dissonance and passive complicity of sticking around despite disagreeing. It didn't help that we had very little time to connect personally with others in the process rehearsing, for we had a big musical task on our plates and we spent the majority of our time preparing musical details. But, then we embarked together on our travels. And, enter Kim André Arnesen, and his words about music taking us into our inner rooms, and these inner rooms being the first stop on the road to any reconciliation or unity with others. It seemed music had been taking me into my inner rooms the whole time. I was living in that fear and misunderstanding which do sadly fill some of these rooms in my heart.

We build up walls against pain in all forms. Without these walls we are exposed and vulnerable all the time. So in grief, or in fear, or in self-righteousness, we build walls. And we box ourselves from others, from the body of Christ, of which we are all a celebrated part. It is so easy to trust fear and pain over God's promise. But,

Christ's body is made of everyone, for everyone, and that at our weakest, or at our most broken down or misunderstood, we are welcomed in spite of - and because of - our weakness. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Despite being so fixated on wishing my Catholic neighbor's heart would change, it dawned on me in Rome that my heart needed a little changing too. Fear does not improve the world or bring about justice. Only love does that. Open, vulnerable, unconditional, singing love.

So, we gathered in the early afternoon to rehearse at the Basilica of St. Paul's Outside the Walls - our final rehearsal with orchestra before the festival performance that evening. The basilica, open to the public for sight-seeing during the day, was empty except for us, choir and orchestra on the steps of the altar. Throughout the hours of our rehearsal, hundreds upon hundreds of sight-seers passed slowly by. They would wander in the far door and, I imagine, hear our music as if from a great distance, billowing and rolling down the chambers and arches of this holy space. In silence, they drew near to us, listened to our music, many of them sitting on the stone floor or leaning against a column for great stretches of time. Some sat and listened to our full rehearsal. Random people, who were invited into this inner room, to drink of the one Spirit in the form of song, so simple, so heartfelt.

In the Spirit we are one with all. May it be so.