**Sermon for October 22, 2023 Psalm 96 “The Equity Song”**

Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord and bless his Name; proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations and his wonders among all peoples. For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; he is more to be feared than all gods. As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols; but it is the Lord who made the heavens. Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence! Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary! Ascribe to the Lord, you families of the peoples; ascribe to the Lord honor and power. Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his Name; bring offerings and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; let the whole earth tremble before him. Tell it out among the nations: "The Lord is King! he has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder and all that is in it; let the field be joyful and all that is therein. Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the Lord when he comes, when he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth.

The Psalms, friends, are a collection of hymns; songs that are used in spiritual gatherings or for private devotion. Like our hymnals, they cover a vast variety of subjects and vary considerably in length. Many of then have a chorus that repeats between verses, just like some of our favorite hymns do. And all of them bring some aspect of God and/or holy living to the forefront, just like good old hymns. But Psalm 96 presents a challenge to our human condition, one that is far from new and was already an old problem a thousand years before Jesus walked the earth. And the problem, at least the one I am going to explore with you today, comes right out of the chute at the very onset of this psalm.

*Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord and bless his Name; proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.* There is a troublemaking word in there that offers challenge to every religious person, ever, because they are human. Somehow, by nature, we humans are resistant to change. It’s silly, really, since change is the very language of our biology, and apparently the very nature of the universe as well, but we don’t much care for it! We need our survival mechanisms, and one of them is thinking that things are stable, dependable, reliable. We value things that are like that: God, church, spouse, certain kinds of investments. But this notion of stability and dependability and reliability is a fiction; a needed one, a place to hide form the harsh pokey bits of life, but not empirically true. The nature of reality is not stasis, but change.

We might like new things, sometimes; clothing, restaurants, movies, but in general, no, new things bring change with them. In our church life, we approach new hymns, for example, with caution or fear, hesitance or outright loathing. And so it is tough to take the opening direction of Psalm 96 into our hearts, that we sing a *new* song unto the Lord. We don’t care much for new songs! Why should we change what is already so comforting and satisfying? Why can’t we just sing How Great thou Art, The Old Rugged Cross, and Amazing Grace every Sunday and be done with it? Well, I’ll tell you why: because God is like a parent, and expects growth and forward momentum from us kids. We can’t do that without new thoughts, new challenges, new aspirations, which we will never entertain if we resolutely remain with the rigidly redundant rictus of reality.

This new song we are asked to sing, by the way, is not a random thing; the songs we write with our lives are topical, contemporary, real and vital and resonant in our own age. And, if it is any comfort, we have been writing and singing these life songs in response to God’s grace forever. Every age brings with it particular challenges and wrongs to be righted, and our life songs are one of the ways we prepare ourselves for the hard work of being God’s representatives in the world.

Come with me back 200 years, when our country was young and still struggling to set up shop here in the Americas. By 1823, most states had their voting laws in place and these laws required only two things in order to vote: you need to be Caucasian, and you needed not to have ovaries. White men, and *only* white men, could vote. And yet *all* others, white women, children, persons of color, both free and slave, were dramatically affected by the results of their voting. And God stirred the hearts of many, who began our first American version of The Equity Song, a new song of fairness and appropriate justice. **Women’s suffrage** came into being, long before we really talked about feminism; you know, that radical idea that women are people! But the laws in those days did not recognize anyone except the ovary-free white guys as full citizens, and that was grossly unjust. They sang their songs and marched their marches and pleaded their cause, and nearly a hundred years later, in August of 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified, and women were allowed to vote.

But of course, nothing exists in a vacuum, and God was inciting other new songs about that time as well. The inequity of voting rights was eclipsed by the various and blatant inequities of **slavery**, and the Equity Songs of Color began to be heard. We folks called Methodist were super numerous in those days, but these challenging songs were not embraced by all of us. By 1845 we Methodists could no longer live with the tension, and our denomination fractured along regional lines into Methodist North and Methodist South. Many town had one of each flavor after that; we had *both* here in Chico, and the building now owned by the good folks on 9th street was the original Methodist Church South sanctuary! It has been moved twice, the famous bell has finally followed the building home, and currently the structure that originally housed pro-slavery worshippers is now filled with free people of all colors. But we had to sing a new song, friends, a song of equity, justice, fairness, and we had to keep singing for a long time. The Civil War ended in 1845, but as mentioned before, we Methodists don’t like change…it took us until 1939 to reunite as one national church.

After the Civil War there were so many Equity Songs that needed to be written and sung. Social reformers were almost always also church folks, and these values shaped our public discourse substantially. The Church dealt with **Reconstruction**, with **Jim Crow** tendencies, with the not-yet-resolved issue of women’s full citizenship, the **abolition of polygamy** among the Mormons, and many others. And one that had been simmering away on the back burner of American society was the idea of **temperance**, that a just society could only be achieved if it was populated by a sober citizenry. As early as 1784 this song began to be heard, and was sung louder and louder until it finally led to Prohibition, whose successfully enacted 18th Amendment banned "the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages in the United States and its possessions." The most Methodist of our justice singers were part of the WCTU, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, a group of passionate advocates one did not wish to run afoul of!

The Church, you see, has *always* been in the business of singing new songs unto the Lord, raising new issues and correcting social and ecclesiastical misfires. The previous century heard many, many justice songs on behalf of women, on behalf of people of color, on behalf of the poor, and we are still writing those songs. If you could have told your grandparents that we would be writing songs about equity regarding non-heterosexual people, they would not have believed you! If you would have been able to tell even your parents that you would someday be part of a United Methodist Church devoted to the full inclusion of all people, no matter their color or their bank account or who they liked to enjoy private horizontal time with, they would have been aghast, but their horror would have been just another part of our human defense mechanisms. It’s easier to sing the old songs, but it does not advance the plot of God’s will and way on earth! Singing a *new* song, an *inspired* song, is our moral duty and indeed, one of the primary purposes of the church.

Paula Dressel of the Race matters Institute, summed up all of our Equity Songs like this: “The route to achieving equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone equally. It will be achieved by treating everyone justly according to their circumstances.” And that is the real point to learn today, my beloved friends, that equity is a God thing, whereas equality is a watered-down human idea. It is our common understanding, from the earliest Jew to the most recent Muslim, that God - Yahweh, Christ, Allah - will measure and judge our world with equity – that is, with justice, with fairness, and without partiality or favor. We work hard in our human ways to be the best this and the most influential that, but God doesn’t really care much about those categories. Our God is a God of equity: justice that considers the life circumstances and needs of individual people. Oh, how we enjoy our worldly privilege! But if we must enjoy it, we may as well wallow in it now, because it means exactly diddly squat to our Lord.

I close by way of an illustration, because it is high time that the people of God got clear about the spiritual concept of equity, and turn loose the social notion of equality. Equality would insist that Life is fair because, after all, we are all in the same boat. Yeah, things are tough, but we’re all in the same boat. But Equity is much more insightful: we are *not* all in the same boat; we are all tossed about on the same stormy sea of Life. But Life’s waves hit differently if you are in a yacht, or if you are in a houseboat, or if you are in a canoe, or if you are clinging to a life preserver, or if you are in fact drowning without any support. Equity realizes that compassion must flow commensurate to actual need. Equity is absolutely the nature of God. And as the Church, equity needs to become second-nature to us, too. Amen.