

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, September 4, 2022
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
“This Is Amazing Grace”
Christian Scripture: I Timothy 1:12-17



I am going to tell you all a dirty little secret. Are you ready for it? It is quite scandalous for a Congregational New England minister in Vermont to confess. I am not sure all of you can handle it. It might shock you. It might cause you worry and concern. It may even offend your sensibilities. It might even cause you to lose your faith. It almost defies the bounds of sensibility. Are you ready?

Sometimes, when I am alone in my office...sometimes when I am alone in my car...sometimes when I am alone in my flat...I listen to Christian praise and worship music. That's right. Sometimes, when one else is around, I listen contemporary Christian music – and even worse, I really enjoy it!

For four weeks, our sermon series will listen to and reflect upon contemporary Christian music. We will do so **not** to advocate for its use in worship at Centre Church, but rather as a devotional focus. I have found that contemporary Christian music lyrics are inspirational. That they are repetitive, a common criticism, is of no consequence to me. Music from Taizé is repetitive. Most monastic music, such as Gregorian chant to which I frequently listen, is highly repetitive. That sacred music is repetitive is hardly novel. Historically speaking, repetitiveness has rarely been considered a rationale to dismiss music. In fact, almost all sacred faith traditions, from Catholic to Hindu, incorporate repetition as a means by which to coax the dwelling of sacred texts (or even sounds) into one's soul rather than have them skip along the surface of one's being like a flat stone does on the water's surface.

Contemporary praise music as a genre, rather than piquing my intellect (for as you all well know, when it comes to music, I have little intellect – I can't even read music), rather than piquing my intellect, praise music restores my soul. It renders me, above all, grateful. I become joyful when I listen to it. My thoughts are inevitably positive when listening to it. I see and view people more benevolently and with more grace. I promise you, I sense myself becoming a better person when I listen to praise music. In short, when I listen to contemporary Christian music, I feel more 'in tune' with God.

Now, I know that contemporary Christian praise music is often associated with the evangelical wing of the Christian church with which I am at political and theological odds. Therefore, I am fully aware that some praise music advocates theologies to which I do not subscribe. For example, you will never hear me preach of ‘substitutionary atonement’ – the belief that Jesus died for our sins as some sort of divine bargain or contractual trade. My God loves me and loves you and needs no sacrifice to love us – and hence we are and have already been saved – we just need to accept it and live according to it. Yet, many traditional hymns that I dearly love and cherish have words and theologies with which I do not agree. Yet, my faith is strong enough to absorb the ‘spirit’ of the songs rather than the ‘letter’ of the songs. I am able in my mind’s eye to take poor theology with ‘a grain of salt’. I am able to take what good I can from old and new Christian music, hymns and praise music alike, and apply it to my life without getting all hung-up and discombobulated about that with which I disagree.

I chose to focus upon contemporary Christian music for this sermon series through the inspiration of a church service I attended in Istanbul, Turkey. I wrote about my visit to the Union Church of Istanbul. Dee and Bob Keller attended this church when they lived in Istanbul. In fact, Dee was confirmed in the church and the Keller family, for as many as four generations, worshipped there.

Our scripture reading this morning from the lectionary calendar resonates with the lyrics found in the song that we are about to listen to this morning, the first song I heard in the worship service at Union Church. In this series, I do *not* wish us to entertain the use of contemporary Christian music at Centre Church. Instead, I share the songs with you as meditative devotions, just as I have done with Allen Myrick's poems.

The first chapter of Paul's first letter to Timothy is in part autobiographical. Paul confessed to Timothy that he is an unlikely Christian; his disposition and his personal history make him the least likely to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul considered himself the worst of sinners. Yet, Paul became the foremost of apostles. Paul confided in verse 14, "The grace of our Lord was poured out abundantly [on me], along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus". The song we will hear very soon sings of this 'amazing grace' that Paul experienced.

In our song this morning, I can do without all the 'King of Kings' language, which just speaks of authoritarianism and patriarchy (England's constitutional monarchy and the long benevolent reign of Queen Elizabeth notwithstanding). Yet, the words "Who breaks the power of sin and darkness" resonates with me. While I can do without the 'worthy is the lamb who was slain' imagery invoked by the music, the words "who makes an orphan a son or daughter" is incredibly moving to me. Like Paul, I consider myself far from worthy of God's love – yet, that

is how amazing God's grace is. Regardless of your theology or mine, the song emphasizes the nature of God's love. It is unfailing. It is amazing. It is mighty. It is strong. It shines like the sun.

This contemporary Christian song honors the memory of our brother Bob Keller when it reminds us that God's amazing grace even conquers the grave. Yes. Death cannot even overcome God's grace and love. Thanks be to God! Halleluiah! Praise be to God!

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".

Music video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgsbaBlaoVc>

Lyrics

Who breaks the power of sin and darkness?
Whose love is mighty and so much stronger?
The King of glory, the King above all kings

Who shakes the whole earth with holy thunder?
And leaves us breathless in awe and wonder?
The King of glory, the King above all kings

This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That You would take my place
That You would bear my cross

You laid down Your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that You've done for me

Who brings our chaos back into order?
Who makes the orphans a son and daughter?
The King of glory, the King of glory

Who rules the nations with truth and justice
Shines like the sun in all of its brilliance
The King of glory, the King above all kings

This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That You would take my place
That You would bear my cross

You laid down Your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that You've done for me

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
Worthy is the King who conquered the grave
Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
Worthy is the King who conquered the grave
Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
Worthy is the King who conquered the grave
Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
Worthy, worthy, worthy

This is amazing grace
This is unfailing love
That You would take my place
That You would bear my cross

You laid down Your life
That I would be set free
Oh, Jesus, I sing for
All that You've done for me

All that You've done for me

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Josh Farro / Phil Wickham / Jeremy Riddle

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