

There is a wonderful little musical called Babble at Babel, that I have led twice, once at my first church in New Hampshire and once here in our Stage Room. You probably know the story of Genesis 11: People, full of arrogance and pride, trying to build a tower up to God, then God confuses their languages (lots of arguing and babble result), then the two leading actors make up, finally shaking hands, starting to be open to each other's point of view... and I'll never forget words in the closing song: Open our hearts, that we might understand the universal language of LOVE.

Love is indeed a universal language; all over the world, people enjoy seeing love and hearing stories about love. We enjoy stories of romantic love, watching grandparents with grandchildren, hearing stories of brave sacrificial love. In all cultures and languages we find romantic love, friendship love, community love, forgiving love, or even sacrificial love as Jesus taught and lived. Love is surely a universal language. Everyone understands smiling faces, friendly body language, open-heartedness and open-mindedness, versus hostile postures with hardening of the heart and closing of the mind.

Now that I'm getting used to having a dog, I'm learning why dogs are often said to have "loyal, unconditional love." Luke may squeal when stepped on, but usually seems to forget quickly and offers wet kisses again. I'm learning to read dogs, what is play, what is aggression... by watching the body language. I really had not watched dogs much, had not known much about a tail up or a tail down, and the origin of the common saying "tail between the legs"; fortunately most of our doggie encounters involve tails up and wagging tails, but Luke also is smart enough to know when hiding behind a tree with tail between legs is the best thing to do! Yes, dogs can teach us much about love and body language. Think

of the perhaps the most obvious body language for humans: crossed arms, versus open arms... It tells us a lot about the mind and heart.

And we enjoy hearing Love Songs. Yes, every culture has love songs. MUSIC itself is a universal language, that echoes and evokes a universal spirit. For love songs, we all have favorites; I recall my father often playing songs like Tea For Two, Star Dust, and Tenderly. I grew up hearing Beatles singing All My Loving, or John Denver singing Annie's Song, or Billy Joel singing I love you "Just The Way You Are." As a people of faith, we know many songs that echo the mood of Psalm 100, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord!" They are usually in what's called a "major" key.... One of the most famous is from Beethoven's 9th symphony, "Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee!" You wouldn't even need the words to catch the mood of this tune! We have other favorites that bring in the triumphant spirit of Jesus, like Crown Him With Many Crowns! Then of course we have the sad songs of faith, usually in what's called a "minor" key, that acknowledge the suffering in the world: from the Psalms, "By the Waters of Babylon," and from Jesus life, songs that we hear often in Holy Week, like "The Via Dolorosa," or "Oh Sacred Head Now Wounded."

To embrace more and more the positive universal spirit of Love and Goodness in the world, I am also thinking of Rick Steves and his attitude toward people of other cultures. I love watching his travel videos (a lot less expensive than trying to go everywhere!). His philosophy of travel broadening the mind and heart, shows an increase of understanding for our human brothers and sisters, which is an increase of Love. Keeping Rick Steve in mind, I could have entitled this sermon, The Universal Language of Love, Music ... and Food! It seems everywhere he goes he is commenting on

the wine and best food. (We can meditate on the universal spirit of tasty food and drink after worship!) Returning to the topic of music, I notice that Rick Steves, besides his articulate historical commentary, often has video footage of the music and dances of country he is visiting.

One thing I want to note, regarding the universal spirit of music, is the variety of instruments in the world! I could have used Psalm 150 as the key scripture for today; it was echoed in our opening song: “Let every instrument be tuned for praise. Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!” Think of joyous singing in so many cultures, and often there are drums and dancing! Just yesterday, the Native American festival on our waterfront involved drumming. And last night, we heard virtuoso accordion playing, and other percussive instruments of the “Zydeco Cha Chas” getting everyone into toe-tapping and dancing in our Stage Room! Even if you can’t make out all the lyrics, you can easily get caught up in the mood of the music.

We’ve talked a bit about church music, the happier, more popular praise songs usually in a major key, and also some songs of lament, usually in a minor key. We know that way back in time, organs were frowned upon as being too ostentatious, then they became the main instrument for churches, and now many worship teams use praise bands with full drum sets. I think we are lucky at Belleville to have an openness to many kinds of instruments and songs, so that we express many different moods and therefore reach people in different moods.

Let me say a word about the Newburyport Choral Society that meets in the Stage Room every Tuesday night, about 100 singers! First of all, the selection of songs for the Christmas Concert will display the “universal language” of music. We have songs from all

over the world, in different languages! And they are songs of varying moods, to meet people who are surely in a various moods. On a recent Tuesday night, we were learning songs from the Ceremony of Carols by Benjamin Brittan. One song starts with the word “Welcome.” Wouldn’t you know, the chorus apparently was not sounding much like true welcome ... maybe we were tired; so our new energetic conductor, Minji Kim, began to model for us what our faces could look like and what our voices could sound like if we were really to mean “Welcome!!!”

Yes, a lesson for the church. We aspire to be a welcoming church, for our God is a God of Hospitality and Christ is our leader in inclusive Love. So our Gospel, Good News, must always be more than just words; our voices need to make a joyful noise, our faces need to wear smiles, our greetings need to be without prejudice, without pre-judging, our genuine attitude must be positive regard for all who enter these doors!

A final word ... about our guest musician today. Having worked with Nancy in her voice lessons and coaching and heard her in concert several times, I know that she fine-tunes her music to match the mood of her lyrics, so that the music carries us away in the mood of the words. And this morning, she is gifting us with a song to express the theme of this service, the theme of a good Universal Spirit, accessible to all with open hearts. We can only pray that more and more people in our broken world will have open hearts to catch the Spirit of Goodness, Peace, Love and Joy... especially through the universal spirit of music! Amen.