

May 16, 2004  
Rev. Gary W. Charles  
Ephesians 5:15-20

"The Church of the Sensational Nightingales"

*Sunday morning with the Sensational Nightingales*

Billy Collins

It was not the Five Mississippi Blind Boys  
who lifted me off the ground  
that Sunday morning  
as I drove down for the paper, some oranges, and bread.  
Nor was it the Dixie Hummingbirds  
or the Soul Stirrers, despite their quickening name,  
or even the Swan Silvertones  
who inspired me to look over the commotion of trees  
into the open vault of the sky.  
No, it was the Sensational Nightingales  
who happened to be singing on the gospel  
station early that Sunday morning  
and must be credited with the bumping up  
of my spirit, the arousal of the mice within.  
I have always loved this harmony,  
like four, sometimes five trains running  
side by side over a contoured landscape –  
make that a shimmering, red-dirt landscape,  
wildflowers growing along the silver tracks,  
lace tablecloths covering the hills,  
the men and women in white shirts and dresses  
walking in the direction of a tall steeple.  
Sunday morning in a perfect Georgia.  
But I am not here to describe the sound  
of the falsetto whine, sepulchral bass,  
alto and tenor fitted snugly in between;  
only to witness my own minor ascension  
that morning as they sang, so parallel,  
about the usual themes,  
the garden of suffering,  
the beads of blood on the forehead,  
the stone before the hillside tomb,  
and the ancient rolling waters

we would all have to cross some day.  
God bless the Sensational Nightingales,  
I thought as I turned up the volume,  
God bless their families and their powder blue suits.  
They are a far cry from the quiet kneeling  
I was raised with,  
a far, hand-clapping cry from the candles  
that glowed in the alcoves  
and the fixed eyes of saints staring down  
from their corners.  
Oh, my cap was on straight that Sunday morning  
And I was fine keeping the car on the road.  
No one would ever have guessed  
I was being lifted into the air by nightingales,  
hoisted by their beaks like a long banner  
that curls across an empty blue sky,  
caught up in the annunciation  
of these high, most encouraging tidings.

("Sunday Morning with the Sensational Nightingales" is from the book *The Art of Drowning*, by Billy Collins, 1995.)

Leave it to Billy Collins to transform a routine Sunday drive to a hike into heaven. An English professor in New York City, Collins could well be the most unlikely U.S. Poet Laureate ever named. His poetry often seems too flip and funny and mundane for one who holds the distinguished title of Poet Laureate. As for me, I'd love to write a "thank you" note to the committee that selected him as our national imaginative voice, because Billy Collins doesn't write poetry that only appeals to an intellectual elite; his poetry appeals to anyone who is willing to look for the extraordinary in the ordinary goings on of life. It's precisely there - in the ordinary goings on of life - that our Celtic ancestors felt that we're most likely to meet God.

Leave it to the Apostle Paul to make a list and then hand it out to the church. I'll confess that when I read Paul's lists, my eyes almost automatically begin to roll back into their sockets, much the way my two grown children's eyes do when I pull out my list of things they need to do. Their eyes either roll back or glaze over with parentally caused cataracts. In much the same way, I initially check out whenever I hear Paul begin one of his lists of how to be and not be a Christian.

The list in Chapter Five of Paul's letter to the Ephesians is no exception - at least, it's not exceptional at the beginning. Though not everyone agrees that Ephesians was written by Paul, the list in Chapter Five sure sounds like Paul. To paraphrase the apostle, the list begins: "Don't live like fools because these are bad times, evil times." You can almost see Paul's admonishing finger wagging and I can almost feel my eyes rolling northward.

Then, out of nowhere, the list-giving, dictate-demanding, do-this-and-do-not-do-that Apostle Paul starts to sound less like an overbearing Christian parent and more like a "sensational nightingale." He stops wagging his finger, raging against foolish behavior and fools, and he starts to sound like one.

Stopping his list midstream, Paul says: "Sing, give thanks to God for everything, all the time, in the name of Jesus." Notice that even here Paul can't quite bring himself to shift out of the imperative mood, but, at least, it is a much more inviting imperative - "Give thanks to God for everything, all the time." Just like what Billy Collins describes in his poem, Paul is talking about what happens when God's grace comes sneaking up on you.

One side of God's grace is being lifted up out of the muck of life - the muck of a messed up marriage, a no-future job, the muck of too much power to too little control. You know what it's like to have muck clinging to you - some of you might even be stuck in some right now. It's nasty and it's thick and it grabs hold of you with the strength of Samson; it's too sticky to shake loose of and too deep to climb out of. The "high, most encouraging tidings" of the Gospel is that you and I don't need to try. In Christ, God has given us a lift ticket out of the muck and a promise to climb in with us when the lift is out of order.

Paul and Billy each talk about a particular moment when they were lifted out of the muck by One who loves us something silly, One who sings glad tidings to us like a momma sings a lullaby to her baby. Billy's moment came on a lazy, Sunday morning, while Paul's moment was much more dramatic. It came at a time in Paul's life when he was absolutely sure that God wanted him to purify Judaism by persecuting Christians. Subtle or dramatic, Paul and Billy, sing of one side of God's grace.

The other side is living like a grace-filled, grateful fool every moment of every day because there is just not enough time to return to God all the thanksgiving we feel, not enough time to sing to the world our own "high, most encouraging tidings." The other side of grace is gratitude. And, I've got to warn you, on this day that you install a new pastor, that gratitude can mess up your life. When it works its way inside you, it makes you see things differently, makes you treat people in ways you never would have done otherwise. Gratitude will send the greed in you packing, because when gratitude nests inside you, you finally know that you can't ever want for more than what you've already been given. Gratitude will make you turn up the volume when the Sensational Nightingales are singing - otherwise you'd miss their song for all the street noise.

Even scarier, gratitude will turn **you** into a Sensational Nightingale. Don't forget that gratitude turned the pious-persecuting-pompous Saul into the certified, original "fool for Christ" Paul. Gratitude turned this church persecutor into a Sensational Nightingale who sang of God's grace in every village where he could draw a crowd. Gratitude changed his job from the self-appointed head of the purity police to a touring, singing, grace-filled fool for Christ.

What Paul learned on the road to Damascus and Collins learned on that early Sunday morning drive is what the church is still learning today - that the future of the church rests not in our being a community of purity police, making sure that we weigh every bag at the church door and not allow in anyone who is carrying too much baggage or check everyone's spiritual ID to make sure they think the same way as we do about Jesus. The future of the church is singing and living out of God's grace, like a community of grateful Sensational Nightingales, people who stop Sunday drivers unawares with "high, encouraging tidings."

Now, I've known Lewis Galloway for a long time and trust me, this boy can sing. He can sing of a Gospel that is not just for the worthy, but for those whom others drive miles out of their way to avoid. He can sing of God's persistent love that won't let you settle for a Sunday morning Christianity. He can sing of God's soothing grace to loved ones gathered in a hospice unit or at the grave of one they love. The future of Second Presbyterian Church has much to do with how well Lewis keeps singing like a sensational nightingale.

***But***, as I said, I've known Lewis for a long time, and while he's a good singer, like most of us, he sounds much better in a crowd. On this joyous day in the life of this outstanding congregation, I hope you'll recommit yourselves to sing like a bunch of Sensational Nightingales, sing God's aria of justice to those in power on behalf of those too tired or weak or broken to sing, sing with your time and money and prayer, sing with creativity and commitment, in genuine gratitude and gladness for God's unrelenting pounding of grace.

On this installation Sunday, I pray for my friend Lewis and his family and I pray for this remarkable family of faith that you will be known not chiefly by the size of your buildings, not by the number of those worshiping in four services every Sunday, not only by your impressive mission outreach in and beyond Indianapolis, not even by your reputation, in the words of George Boyle, as "the City on the Hill." I pray that when people speak of Second Presbyterian Church, people will say, without a stutter or a pause, "Oh yeah, Second Presbyterian Church, that's the church of sensational nightingales."

Amen.