

June 28, 2020

The Psalms

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for the gift of music and for the gifts of all the musicians you bring into our midst. May we praise you with string and lyre and voice as our ancestors did. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Best of ... Triune's Piano

When I arrived at Triune nearly 15 years ago, there was an old upright piano right over there at floor level. It was played with great energy by Henry Gibson.

Henry had been the faithful pianist in this church for more than four decades – through its glory days as a United Methodist church, through its long decline, through its dissolving and transformation to the non-denominational Triune Mercy Center.

Henry was wonderful at playing the grand old hymns, and to this day, sometimes does funerals for us. But as we began to grow and diversify, we wanted other kinds of music, too.

We didn't have any money, so in those early days I invited everyone I had ever met who played an instrument or wanted to, who sang or wanted to. And just between us, there were some stinkers. I would often sit back there with the bulletin over my face so people couldn't see my reaction.

But there were also some astoundingly talented individuals. One of them, Percy Croft, pulled together an a cappella gospel quartet. They got invited to sing on Channel 16 and at First Baptist of Easley and other churches.

Meanwhile, our partners over at Earle Street Baptist had inherited a 9-foot grand piano when their mother church, Central Baptist, closed. They used it for awhile, but they wanted to renovate, and it was in the way. So they offered the piano to us.

Well, it was going to cost \$500 to move it. I had no idea if it was worth \$500 or not. And did I mention, we had no money?

Fortunately, we did have a good friend in Virginia Uldrick, the founder of the Governor's School for the Arts and perhaps the most musical person in all of Greenville. She went over to Earle Street, tried out the piano and proclaimed, "You must have this piano."

So we moved it here. A beautiful, black 9-foot grand piano.

One day, our gospel quartet singer Melvin Andre Jerome Simpson hopped up on the bench. And from his hands came the most beautiful sounds.

"What is that?" I asked him. "Oh, just something I wrote," he answered.

Andre played for us a few times, most recently on our first recorded service back in March. Other homeless, or formerly homeless, men played for us over the years.

Some had suffered brain damage. Some were mentally disabled. But when they were at the keyboard, something came alive. To be able to offer them a place to share their gift of music was the best incarnation of Triune's community.

So we know that music can be beautiful, that it can touch parts of us inaccessible to the spoken word. But have you ever wondered why it's appropriate for worship?

Well, the psalms are filled with references that I take as instructions. Here's Psalm 98:

- ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
- ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
- ⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

We rocked along for many years with a grand piano that was definitely “above our raising.” We had evening services back then, and a former nightclub singer named Becky Rochester joined us. I can see her over there now, pointing heavenward after every song, giving God the credit as people applauded.

One evening on her way in, Becky tripped and fell. She was a heavysset woman, and it took three men to lift her from the floor and help her to the piano bench. As the service went on, her ankle throbbed more and more. She feared she’d fractured it.

Our prayer warrior at the time, Robbie Boman, noted her discomfort. After the service, she invited people to surround Becky on the piano bench, to touch her shoulders and her hurt ankle and to pray for healing. And Becky described a warm feeling like molten lava that infused her ankle.

Afterward she stood and walked out, her ankle a little tender, but healed. I cannot tell you how many times she told that story.

Well, the years went by and more people began coming to morning worship. We were still begging, borrowing and stealing musicians. I told our board of directors that when we got to 200 consistently in worship, I'd hire a music director.

And they said, "What are you waiting for?"

As I was thinking about what a music director for Triune might look like, it just so happened that my guitarist son Taylor came to play for us one Sunday. He lived in Greenville at the time, and his band's keyboard player wanted to come with him.

So Andy Welchel came to worship that morning. Afterward he ran out to his car and brought me his resume.

I was genuinely confused. "Why would we hire a rock 'n' roll keyboard player?" I asked him.

And he said, "Oh, I'm the organist at St. Mary Magdalene."

Well, I wasn't sure I believed that. But since they are a partner church, I called down there. And they were genuinely saddened that we wanted to steal their organist.

Then I called a Baptist pastor and a Methodist pastor at churches where Andy had worked, and they raved about him.

So in 2012, Andy joined us as music director. Our music, of course, made a huge leap forward.

Our original gospel quartet had disbanded by then, but a terrific gospel band grew up in its place, led by keyboardist Michelle Luster. They played once a month.

Andre and one of our homeless men, Daniel Steadman, played piano. Michelle and Jerri Gray and Anthony Neely sang, Charles McGee played bass, Curtis Sims or Stan Witherspoon were on drums. They got invited to First Presbyterian of Greer and South Main Mercy Center in Anderson.

Everywhere they went, there was applause, loud, enthusiastic applause. Is clapping appropriate during worship? Here's what Psalm 47 has to say:

¹ Clap your hands, all you peoples;

shout to God with loud songs of joy.

² For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome,
a great king over all the earth.

Meanwhile, for the other three Sundays each month, Andy was struggling to play piano *and* direct the choir. So he hired a woman named Jen St. Sjarna as an accompanist.

Jen was also an amazing singer. My most vivid memory is of her at the piano, singing Patty Griffin's song about Martin Luther King Jr:

I went up to the mountain
Because you asked me to

After Jen left, Andy hired another accompanist. A man named Russ Long who is pictured in Owen's cartoon.

Russ was truly a concert pianist, and we marveled that he was willing to play for us. But it turned out Russ had a Triune story of his own, and he allowed me tell it.

As some of you know, around the first of each year, I preached a sermon called "This Time, Next Year." And I told about someone who'd made a dramatic change during the preceding year. The idea was to encourage someone listening that they might make a similar change in a year's time.

I didn't name Russ at the beginning of that sermon, allowing everyone to guess who I was talking about.

His story began when he was a year old and diagnosed with “brittle bone disease.” In his lifetime, he had suffered more than 50 breaks or fractures and 15 surgeries.

With those surgeries came narcotic medications. For most of his life, he took them as prescribed, and there was no problem. He had an active career as an incredibly gifted pianist.

But then he began to experience excruciating back pain. He saw several doctors and underwent treatment, but nothing worked. Except the narcotics. They gave him some relief from the debilitating pain.

After a few months, he noticed the medication was no longer helping quite as much. So he began taking more. But the doctors weren't prescribing more, so he began to buy pills on the street. He had a job as music director for a church school, and within months, he was spending his entire paycheck on pills.

As he drove around some of Greenville's roughest areas, cash in hand, seeking out dealers, he knew he could've been robbed. He knew

he could've been arrested. But nothing mattered but getting those pills.

In 2013, his mother suffered a stroke. He was made Power of Attorney to oversee her finances. By this point, his salary wasn't enough to cover his pills, and he began withdrawing his mother's money.

At the height of his addiction, he was consuming 80 to 90 pills a day at a cost of \$500 to \$600.

By December 2014, he had withdrawn more than \$75,000 and depleted his mother's retirement account. Sitting in Triune's worship service after playing, he said, "I realized that my life was spiraling out of control, but I was so deep into my addiction, there was no way I could stop on my own.... I was at the darkest place of my life."

The next Saturday he went to his other job as usual. On the way home, he pulled into a gas station and sat in his car, completely numb.

How could he live with what he'd done, devastating lives and hurting the people he loved most?

He thought about ending his life. But instead, he called an addiction hotline. They put him in touch with a treatment center in California. Two days later he was on a plane.

It was hard detoxing, he said, and especially hard facing his life sober. He lost his job as a music director for that church school. He knew it might take years to repair the financial damage and to re-establish trust with his family.

But he prayed for forgiveness. And he chose to focus on the positive things he had left. In his newfound sobriety, his family forgave him. He began to repay his mother. He established a strong spiritual connection with God.

Here's the last thing he said: "For the first time in a very long time, I feel good about myself, my life and the direction it's going. I have once again found the passion for my music and am excited about

my career and its future. I hope my story may impact someone else's life who is struggling with the same demons I was.”

At that point in the sermon, I asked the person I was talking about to come to that grand old piano and show us what he could do. But unbeknownst to me, Russ had asked Andy and the drummer and guitarist to play along with him, so all four stood up.

The congregation was looking around like, *Which one is it?* But then everyone saw Russ's face streaming with tears and figured it had to be him. And then he tore into that old piano with the theme from *Exodus*.

Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. Psalm 84.

Russ did eventually leave us, to take a cool job as music director of a dinner theater show in Chicago.

Earlier, I mentioned Virginia Uldrick. Virginia staged several benefit concerts for us, bringing Vance Jenkins from Buncombe Street

to accompany singers such as Myra Cordell, Sarah Reese and Bruce Schoonmaker.

Those concerts were great fundraisers, so then we invited our friend Kyle Matthews from First Baptist Greenville to perform a fundraiser. Kyle agreed, but said he couldn't perform a whole concert at that piano with his back to the audience. It had to be up here.

At that point, we didn't have the piano riser, and he was right: the audience could not have seen him. So we called a piano moving company to ask how we could get the piano from the floor to here.

And they said, *You need more muscle than we have.*

We'd recommend surrounding that piano with dozens of men and let them lift it.

So we did.

The Sunday morning after the concert, that piano was still up here and there was barely room for me. So I asked people in the congregation to help put it back down after the service.

I was at the front door shaking hands and heard a mighty roar go up. Our congregants had moved that piano in less than 30 seconds.

We had another worshiper, Gene Kendricks, who didn't like having that piano at floor level. Russ Long was only about 5-foot-4, and people had to crane to see him.

So Gene came in and built this incredible riser for the piano. That's what allows you to see Andy and David Hanna and Michael when they play.

That old piano from Central Baptist by way of Earle Street served us well for many years. But it was more than 50 years old, and we were having to get it tuned all the time. Andy finally told us it simply couldn't hold a tune anymore.

So our musicians found this digital model that we have today. So we march on with Henry playing a funeral, Andy a prelude, a guest such as Michael singing, "Almighty God, give me just a little more time to right all the wrong that I have done."

When we design a worship service, we know that every piece of it will not speak to every person. But we hope there will be something to speak to each person here.

I got an email from an old friend in Oregon this week. She had watched us online last Sunday. My sermon was OK, she said, but what she raved about was Jerry Rosemond's leading of the responsive reading.

That's exactly why we have visual art and prayer, responsive readings and congregational singing, and in ordinary times, an offertory and communion.

That's why we have our piano, the instrument through which we continue to proclaim the Word. The Musical Word.

We do so because the book of psalms ends with these words from Psalm 150:

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary

- ³ Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
- ⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
- ⁵ Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
- ⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!

Hallelujah. Amen.