

On October 16, 2005, MPUC participated in the World-Wide Celebration of Congregational Singing. This celebrated the 150 anniversary of the publication of the Plymouth Hymnal which was the first American hymnal that printed both the music and words. Our music director and organist Curt Oliver prepared fascinating background information on some important hymns, the high point of which was an exposition of "America the Beautiful" which was written by a woman who was a feminist, socialist, and out-of-the-closet lesbian.

October 16, 2005

Hymn # 358 Dear Lord and Father of mankind, Forgive our foolish ways....

These words were written in 1872 by John Greenleaf Whittier, one of the most famous and most popular poets in 19th century America. He was a poet, and really did not set out to write a hymn. In fact, he was not particularly fond of hymns and hymn singing. He was a Quaker, and for him the worship of God was primarily in silence. Quakers still gather to worship in silence. We have Quaker neighbors just a few blocks away on Grand Avenue. If someone feels moved to share a spiritual insight, they're free to do that. But most Quaker communal worship time is spent in quiet reflection and meditation.

Whittier wrote the words of "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" as part of a longer poem called "The Brewing of Soma." And he had a point to make – he was criticizing the noisy in-your-face religious gatherings of the Pentecostals of his time, who were usually called holy rollers in those days.

But let's start by looking at his first six words – Dear Lord and Father of mankind. Words like that seem sexist to us in the 21st century. Hymn writers and public speakers today don't refer to people as "men" or to humanity as mankind. And Father is just one of many names we can use for God. Of course, Jesus called God Father, but we're a little shy about doing that today. But remember that John Greenleaf Whittier lived in the 19th century and was bound by the language and custom of his time just as we are bound by ours. He was definitely not a sexist. In fact he was a very active social reformer, and, yes, one could say and out front liberal. The L word. As a Quaker he was a member of the first Christian denomination to ordain women. It's a tenet of the Quaker faith that men and women are equal in the sight of God. Presbyterians in the U.S. didn't get around to ordaining women until the 1950's, but in 1660, a Quaker woman in England named Margaret Fell published a treatise with a long but wonderful title... "*Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All Such as Speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus And How Women Were the First That Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and Were Sent by Christ's Own Command Before He Ascended to the Father (John 20:17).*" A long title for a short but powerful tract.

That was the spirit and tradition into which Whittier was born and lived. And Whittier himself was very active in the movement to abolish slavery. He attended the first anti-

slavery national convention in 1833 when he was 26 years old – a controversial and daring thing to do at the time. And later in his life he used his considerable fame and influence to help bring the writing of women poets into print. o let's cut Whittier some slack on his not-so-modern choice of words. He was a great poet, and he has some admirable alliteration with his f-words – dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways. So if we want to revise or fix his words to fit our modern sensibilities, we should be at least as good a poet as Whittier was. And I think I'll pass.

You know that Mac Plymouth encourages hymn writers through our annual hymn contest. This is nothing new for this congregation. In 1870, one of our parent churches, Plymouth Congregational Church of St, Paul, commissioned John Greenleaf Whittier to write a hymn to celebrate the dedication of their new church building in 1872. That hymn was “All things are thine, no gift have we, Lord of all gifts to offer thee. And hence with grateful hearts today, Thine own before thy feet we lay.” That hymn is still sung by many churches as they bring up the offering plates.

But let's get back to today's hymn. The year was 1872, the same year as our Plymouth Church hymn – All things are thine. The holy rollers came to Whittier's town and set up their tents. There weren't like today's Pentecostals, with praise choruses and gentle waving of hands. These were folks who yelled and screamed...in fact the more noise you made and the more wildly you danced, the more righteous and holy you were assumed to be. You'd throw a spiritual tantrum. You'd get so heated up with the Holy Spirit that sometimes you had to tear off some of your clothes. It was a kind of raucous religious one-upmanship. Whittier didn't buy it. In fact, it was the opposite of his understanding of worship. We might think of this as the worship wars of the 1870's – and we have our own worship wars today. There are never any easy or absolute answers.

So Whittier published an opinion piece in the form of a poem, “The Brewing of Soma.” He wrote that a radical group of Hindu priests marched off into the forest to brew a magic potion called Soma. When they drank it they imagined they were seeing visions of the gods. They danced and screamed and rent their garments. But in fact, all they were doing was scaring the cattle. The final stanzas of this longer poem are the words of our hymn.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find, (Quaker service, AFSC)
In deeper reverence, praise. (You serve God through service to your fellow humans).

His 2nd stanza is based on the calling of Jesus' first disciples, recorded in the first chapter of Mark -

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,

Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow Thee.

The 3rd stanza is based on Matthew 14: 22-23 - It's just after the Feeding of the 5,000. Matthew writes "Then he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up into the hills by himself to pray."

O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!

V. 4 - Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease; (OUR strivings – get away from your own Take from our
souls the strain and stress, agendas. Listen to
And let our ordered lives confess what God is saying to you)
The beauty of Thy peace.

In the final stanza Whittier quotes from the book of I Kings 19:11-13. - "And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle."

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

The music was written in 1887 by an Englishman named Frederick Maker, who was an organist and choir director at various Methodist and Congregational churches in Bristol, England.

As we sing this hymn, let's start the first stanza at a good healthy volume, but then sing each of the following verses a bit more softly. The final verse, then, will be in a still small voice.

Hymn # 696 - America the Beautiful

Oh no! Not a schmaltzy patriotic song that seems to pour holy water on the red, white and blue. That kind of stuff is so hard to sing right now. “America the Beautiful” is used to prop up political campaigns of both the right wing and the left wing. It’s been proposed as a better choice for our national anthem than “The Star Spangled Banner” and it is a better and more singable piece of music.

But this poem is a prayer...God pops up in every stanza. So from a constitutional point of view it has no business being our national anthem...at least as the American constitution now stands. And if you read the words carefully they pack quite a punch. One of the problems is that we know these words so well, they’re almost engraved in the hard drive of our brains, and we can sing them on auto-pilot, without spending the time to see and hear what the words really say.

I was in grade school - long ago - when I first heard the story about the author, Katherine Lee Bates. She had climbed Pike’s Peak...the year was 1893, and she was thrilled by the sense of having the whole nation laid out before her, from sea to shining sea. They just didn’t have hills like that back home in Massachusetts. Maybe you heard that story too, somewhere in the 4th or 5th grade. Well, that part of the story is true. But there’s much more to her poem and to Katherine Lee Bates’ very interesting life. It’s time to hear, as radio commentator Paul Harvey likes to say – “the rest of the story.”

Katherine Lee Bates was a preacher’s kid...she was born in Falmouth, MA in 1859. She attended Wellesley College and wound up spending the rest of her life there, joining the faculty and teaching English at Wellesley for 40 years, from 1885-1925.

She was an English teacher and much more. Let’s focus on three more aspects of her life. Katherine Lee Bates was an ardent feminist, a Christian liberal and even a kind of Christian socialist; and she was an up front lesbian. She was very involved in the political and social struggles of her day.

As a feminist she fought eloquently for full rights for women, including the right to vote. And she put a plug right in the final lines of her most famous poem, America the Beautiful. Look at the closing lines of stanza 3 –“America! America! God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty IN LAW!”

In other words, America, if you mean what you say in your constitution and your much touted love of liberty, confirm you liberty in LAW, and give every citizen the vote.

She was also very troubled by the economic injustice and inequality she saw in America. That's addressed in stanza two – "America! America! May God thy gold refine, till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine." Remember, she's writing this in the 1890's – the grand age of the robber barons. The very wealthy were building their grand estates at Newport, on Long Island, and along St. Paul's Summit Avenue, yet there were plenty of slums in those same cities. "Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears." She's asking in stanza two that financial success be combined with nobleness of spirit, and that every capital gain have an element of divine compassion and generosity. In other words, you robber barons, Share the wealth, share the good times. Is it right to have such a huge disparity between the rich and the poor? That question for the 1890's of course is still a question for us today. How much money does a CEO need to make, and what should they do with that money? "America! America, may God thy gold refine, Till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine. "

And she was very suspicious of what she saw as growing American imperialism. The hawks in Congress and in the press were talking about America's manifest destiny, and our duty to spread our ideals throughout the world. At the end of the 19th century, this mindset led to the War of 1898, when under what turned out to be very trumped up pretenses, we invaded Cuba and the Philippines to set up governments there that were more to our liking. Thousands of people died, including a family member of mine. My Grandpa Oliver's brother died in Manila in 1898. Bates saw this as an unnecessary war, and spoke out against it. The "heroes proved in liberating strife" she refers to in the 2nd stanza were more likely the Civil War soldiers who were fighting for a more noble cause when she was a small girl.

So she was a Christian liberal and a kind of Christian socialist, but I also mentioned the L word. She was an up front lesbian. She kept a diary as a child, and it contains such lines as "I like women better than men." "I like fat women better than lean women." And "Sewing is expected of girls, why not of boys?" All this from a young girl writing in the 1870's. It was at Wellesley that she met and fell in love with Katherine Coman, a professor of economics. They lived together, happily, on campus, for 25 years. It was no secret, although it wasn't talked about or celebrated in the language we might use today. Katherine Coman, Bates' partner, was also a very distinguished scholar, the author of six books and numerous articles about American history and economics. Also a social activist, she founded a social agency in Boston called Dennison House, which still exists.

By 1907 Katherine Bates was earning very healthy royalties from her poem America the Beautiful, and she was able to build a house just off campus where the two women lived together. There was a separate office for Katherine Coman, the economist, on the third floor. But in 1912, Ms. Coman was diagnosed with breast cancer. Katherine Bates installed an elevator in the house to help her partner get up to her office on the third floor. Throughout her sickness, Bates nursed her and held her. But Katherine Coman died in 1915. Katherine Bates wrote a volume of poetry called "Yellow Clover, a Book of

Remembrance” which celebrated their love and life together. The title came from the small flowers that the women pressed into their letters to each other when they were separated by their travels.

In her later years, Bates wrote to a friend that since Katherine Coman died, she was never quite sure whether she herself was alive.... or not....so much of her had disappeared with Coman. She continued to write – poetry, and several children’s books including a popular one about the dog the two women made a part of their household.

Katherine Lee Bates died at the age of 70 in 1929. Maybe some day when grade school children hear about Katherine Lee Bates and Pikes Peak, and America the Beautiful, they can hear the rest of the story too.

But for now I’m sure she’s smiling at the wonderful irony of having her really rather radical words sung at political conventions where the agenda includes once a gain denying her and her partner their full civil rights. And she’s hoping that all of us will really listen to the words.

If you look at the bottom of the page in the hymnal it says the words date from 1904. That’s only partly true. She wrote the basic poem in 1893, but today we sing her own revised version of 1904. The tune was written by an Episcopal church organist in Newark, NJ, for different words altogether, several years before Bates visited Pikes Peak. An early 20th century hymnal editor discovered that the words and the tune were a perfect fit, and the rest is history. But composer Samuel Ward died in 1903 and never heard his tune sung to the words that made it famous.

And now you know – the rest of the story. Let’s stand and sing “America the Beautiful,” a hymn we can truly call “A Lesbian Love Song to America.”.