

Song of Reconciliation

3/6/2016

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Last summer, the song was everywhere. "Shut Up and Dance." If you turned on the radio, went to a mall or attended a wedding reception, you certainly heard this song by the group Walk the Moon. "The woman is my des-tin-y ... She said ooh ooh ohh ... Shut up and dance with me." Impossible to ignore. Or avoid.

The song was an earworm -- a catchy piece of music that lodges itself deep in your brain. Over the years, there have been many such tunes that get into our heads and then don't ever get out. Let's play a little of "Name That Tune." I'll sing the first few words and you supply the rest...

- "Ding, Dong, the Witch is Dead" from The Wizard of Oz.
- "It's a Small World." From Disney.
- "Who Let the Dogs Out" by Baha Men.

So what makes these songs so viral and addictive? It may not be one of the most pressing questions of our times, but social scientists are trying to provide an answer anyway. Some studies point to the power of background singers or high pitches. One study attempted to link the popularity of these songs to our gross domestic product.

But the newest explanation focuses on lyrics. After studying every pop hit since 1958, researchers have discovered that a song's popularity is tied to the simplicity of the lyrics and how often they are repeated. They are finding that the human brain has a weakness for plainness.

Tempo does not appear to matter, according to one of the researchers. Instead, the key is a chorus that is repeated frequently using a limited vocabulary. "Shut Up and Dance" achieves this with four simple words repeated 12 times.

DJ Evan Reitmeyer is asked to play the song at almost every Washington-area wedding reception. "It's so simple and so repetitive," he said to The Washington Post. "The first time I heard it, I said, 'That's a hit.' You can just tell right away."

Researchers use a theory in psychology to explain this: processing fluency. The theory says that people are more likely to engage in a behavior if it is easy to do. Makes sense, right? In a nutshell, "human brains get really jazzed about things that are easy to grasp."

Processing fluency explains the success of simple designs, such as the rounded corners of the iPhone. It reveals why we prefer directions printed in a font that is simple instead of complicated. And it explains why we cannot get the chorus of "Who Let the Dogs Out" out of our brains.

Who let the dogs out

Woof, woof, woof, woof, woof

Who let the dogs out

Woof, woof, woof, woof, woof

Paul's processing fluency

Paul was ahead of his time in employing processing fluency in 2 Corinthians. In today's text, he is singing a song of reconciliation: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself ... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. ... on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (vv. 18-20, emphases added).

Reconciled ... reconciliation ... reconciling ... reconciliation ... be reconciled. Simple words, repeated frequently.

At the very heart of the Christian faith is reconciliation -- the reconciliation of people to God and people one to another. Paul drives this home through simplicity and repetition, knowing that "human brains get really jazzed about things that are easy to grasp."

What is reconciliation?

But what exactly is reconciliation? In a sermon for the Duke Center for Reconciliation, New Testament scholar Richard Hays says that the interesting thing about the word "reconciliation" in ordinary Greek usage is that it is not typically a religious term. "Rather, it is a word drawn from the sphere of politics; it refers to dispute resolution. So one could speak of the diplomatic

reconciliation of warring nations or, in the sphere of personal relationships, the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife."

The apostle Paul says that God "reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18). God has worked through Christ to resolve a dispute with us, repairing the relationship that had been broken by sin. The work of reconciliation has been started by God, and now Christians are challenged to offer a ministry of reconciliation, resolving disputes between individuals and communities.

We do this, says Hays, using "practices that show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness and a self-giving grace that the world could not even dream of apart from Christ." This is a message that the highly polarized and fractured Christian community in Corinth needed to hear, and that we need to hear as well. Today, we struggle with many of the same issues that afflicted the Corinthians, i.e., "problems of doctrine, discipline and vision," and, according to professor of history Garry Wills, "problems of class, of gender, of personalities."

In the face of such problems, we need dispute resolution. We need a song of reconciliation.

Examples of reconciliation at work

Today, this song is being sung in churches around the world. In Berlin, a congregation called Reconciliation Parish sits right next to a fragment of the Berlin Wall that once divided both the city and members of this congregation. Since the fall of the wall, the church has worked to bring former enemies into dialogue with one another -- working hard to resolve disputes between individuals.

Reconciliation Parish has hosted conversations between former members of the East German Secret Police (Stasi) and their victims. The late Pastor Manfred Fischer found that "victims are keen to forgive, and willing." But first, there needs to be an honest and open word, such as "I am sorry. I acted in a wrong way."

Pastor Fischer knew that, in East Germany, people used to be punished for speaking openly, and they were still suffering from having spoken out -- they lost education and jobs. Admitting that these people were victims is very

difficult for many who did wrong. Fischer saw this same problem with the World War II generation that did not want to discuss their history under Hitler.

But there can be no reconciliation -- with God or with other people -- without an honest and open word. Overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships is best done through conversation, confession and forgiveness in a safe and hospitable Christian community -- one that's grounded in the reconciling work of God. Reconciliation always begins with what God has done through Christ, establishing a "new creation" (v. 17) in which Christ's love governs every perception and action.

At Saddleback Church in California, work is being done to resolve disputes between communities. A song of reconciliation was offered during a conversation between Paul Kagame, president of the Republic of Rwanda, and Yale theologian Miroslav Volf. They talked about the transformational power of reconciliation and how it reunited the people of Rwanda after its 1994 genocide.

President Kagame said that he believes that the role of the government is to embrace everyone, and "bring them together," while the role of the church is to be a voice to point out when the government is wrong. He admitted, however, that during the genocide the church and government "were almost one and the same," so the church could not distance itself from the action of the government.

Miroslav Volf, who lived through the Bosnian conflict, said loving one's enemies is the truly Christian response in such a situation. "To forgive is an act of power," Volf said, "When I forgive, I'm in charge. I'm releasing you from the wrong." Although the United States is not experiencing genocide, pastor Rick Warren said that stories of reconciliation are relevant because the country is hurting from division on so many issues.

Promoting reconciliation is at the top of Warren's agenda, and both he and his church members are trying to do this work in their community and around the world. Every year, members of Saddleback participate in a Christian-Muslim picnic, building bridges of relationship. They partner with African-American congregations in the city of Compton, California. Bridges are being built with Hispanic pastors in Southern California, and work is being done to keep young people out of gangs and in school. In Rwanda, teams

from Saddleback have partnered with church leaders, equipped pastors and worked on the issue of reconciliation.

Where is reconciliation needed?

Where do you see a dispute that needs to be resolved? With your spouse? With a family member? With a friend? With a fellow church member? With a group in the community?

We need to sing a song of reconciliation today, because we are hurting from division -- as individuals, as a church, as a nation and as a world. Reconciliation happens when we speak open and honest words which, in turn, lead to new and peaceful relationships. Disputes are resolved when we offer and accept forgiveness based on the work that God has done in Christ. Reconciliation happens when we show each other love, mercy and a self-giving grace. This work can be done in our personal relationships, among groups in our congregation, in our increasingly-diverse communities, and in the world around us.

Reconciliation is a song that should be inescapable in the Christian church, impossible to avoid or ignore. So let's sing it together, keeping it simple and repeating it as frequently as we can.

Writing from Macedonia, where he had been criticized, Paul plays with the noun and verb for reconciliation. In Greek these words can signify a change in relationship with financial overtones. What is the cost of faithfulness? A life lived differently.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Common English Bible:

So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we

know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!

All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation.

So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

May God add a blessing to the reading, hearing and doing of this Word.