

“The Brain On Music and Why We Love U2”  
 Easter 5A (May 10, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 9)**  
 Scripture: Psalm 31:1-5; 1 Peter 2:9; John 14:1-3  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

During one of my daily Community Chats, I asked the question, What do you miss most about meeting together in church in person? Those of you who joined that chat said things like, “I miss the closeness with other people.” “I miss the hugs.” “I miss the conversation during coffee hour.” “I miss the dish-to-pass meals.” “I miss seeing the children running around the church.” “I miss the collective energy of many people filling a space.” “I miss arriving early on a Sunday morning and watching everyone start to gather.” “I miss the choir.” “I miss the joyful noises.” I said on that chat that one thing I’ve missed is the collective laughter that erupts from a gathered congregation. If someone says something funny during the service, I can’t hear you all laughing as you watch from home, and I miss that. But many of you mentioned that one thing you miss is hearing an entire congregation singing together.

I’m not at all surprised that we miss congregational singing. Cognitive psychologists - like Daniel Levitin of McGill University - tell us that music engages every region of the human brain.<sup>1</sup> They tell us that listening to music releases dopamine in our brains - the feel-good hormone. And they tell us that singing *together* releases oxytocin - the cuddle hormone, the hormone released when we bond socially and feel a sense of connection. So, even though we can still *listen* to music as we socially distance, we all miss the release of oxytocin that comes from singing together as a congregation. Songwriter and blogger, Wendell Kimbrough, has written about how listening to music and singing together affected his brain when he attended a U2 concert at FedEx Field in Maryland. Before social distancing, U2 concerts would fill stadiums with people - 50, 60, 80,000 strong. “[The concert I attended at FedEx Field,]” writes Kimbrough, was “colossal in scope [with 80,000 people in the crowd].” “U2,” he writes, “has been producing popular music for [decades], [and many people know] at least the choruses to most of their hits ... .” And, he says, U2’s singer, Bono, “knows how to get people singing ... , [and he knows when] to shut up ... so the crowd can hear itself [singing]. So when you go to a U2 concert,” says Kimbrough, “you not only get to hear a rock band playing really loudly for tens of thousands of people; you also get to hear tens of thousands of people singing ... at the top of their lungs *in unison!* Now that is amazing.” Kimbrough continues: “I got to hear 80,000 people singing [the lyrics to the U2 song “Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” - a song about spiritual searching.] ... [It was] powerfully transcendent,” he says, “... [a] spiritual experience.” “One of the reasons ... U2 is so popular,” he says, “is [that] they harness and utilize the power of corporate singing at their shows.” Kimbrough then goes on to cite Daniel Levitin, cognitive psychologist at McGill, about the release of oxytocin - the social-bonding hormone - when we sing together, whether in church or at a U2 concert.

In his *Little Book of Hygge*, Meik Wiking (which is just an awesome name), the CEO of the Happiness Research Institute in Copenhagen, talks about the release of oxytocin. He studies

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bethfinke.com/blog/2012/01/12/this-is-your-brain-on-music/>

what it is that makes people happy, and he focuses on the practices of *hygge* in his home country of Denmark. The word *hygge* is a bit like the English word coziness, and it can involve lit candles, warm drinks, board games, movies, blankets, fireplaces, and closeness with other people.<sup>2</sup> *Hygge* releases oxytocin, he says. And *hygge*, he says, is the main reason why people in Denmark rank near the top of the worldwide happiness index almost every year. Danes are intentional about cultivating coziness. “We have a basic need to feel connected with others,” writes Meik Wiking, and this connection - whether it’s lighting candles, wrapping ourselves in furry blankets, sitting beside warm fires, sharing conversation, or even singing together at U2 concerts or in congregations - this sense of connection, he says, is good for our health. Which is one reason why social distancing has been such a challenge. It’s why we miss the closeness of other people, the hugs, the conversation during coffee hour, the dish-to-pass meals, the energetic children racing to grab cookies after church, the laughter, the joyful noises of a congregation meeting in person, and the congregational singing.

Like many of the world’s great religions, Christianity has been, since its birth, a religion of people gathering together - hugging each other, eating together, laughing together, praying together, singing together - releasing oxytocin together. Some scholars who study the cognitive and evolutionary psychology of religion have argued that religion developed in our species precisely because of this sense of community.<sup>3</sup> Religion helped to bond us more tightly together. And some theologians have said that this should be obvious, since God *is* community (three-in-one, in our tradition), and God created us to be communal creatures who gather and sing and pray and eat together in person, releasing oxytocin all over the place. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk even argues that *being-with* each other - “co-belonging,” as he calls it - is our fundamental state as human beings.<sup>4</sup>

One theme that emerges from today’s lectionary readings is the theme of community - togetherness, unity, oneness. Today’s Old Testament reading from Psalm 31 is a song written by David - the king, warrior, poet, and songwriter of Israelite history. When or why the Psalm was penned remains a mystery, but the Psalm was used in Jewish and Christian history as a song meant for congregational worship - a song for the collective release of oxytocin. This Psalm - this personal poem and prayer - probably was first composed as David’s own individual hymn to God. “In you, O LORD, *I* seek refuge,” he sings. “Do not let *me* be put to shame,” he sings. “Deliver *me*.” “Listen to *me*.” “You are *my* rock and fortress.” “Into your hand *I* commit *my* spirit,” he sings. It’s personal and passionate language - the songwriter’s own. Perhaps his muse struck - perhaps these inspired words came to him - during a time of personal crisis. Shepherd David the young man was the object of King Saul’s murderous jealousy - Saul tried to kill David with a spear. Maybe he penned Psalm 31 in response to that threat. King David the middle-age man was often on the run as family crises and various rebellions in his kingdom put his life in the balance. Maybe he penned Psalm 31 while fleeing for his life. And David’s own personal failings as a human being made him feel shame and isolation. Psalm 31 is his personal cry to God for refuge and shelter, deliverance and rescue, guidance and trust. It’s a song that began as a personal prayer, but its language was, in a way, tailor made for collective singing and liturgy during Israel’s national crisis of exile a few centuries later. The song became a *congregational* cry to God for refuge and shelter, deliverance and rescue, guidance and trust. A *collective* release

<sup>2</sup> Meik Wiking, *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 42ff.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226010821\\_The\\_Cognitive\\_and\\_Evolutionary\\_Psychology\\_of\\_Religion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226010821_The_Cognitive_and_Evolutionary_Psychology_of_Religion)

<sup>4</sup> <https://carducc.wordpress.com/2020/04/06/co-belonging-during-covid-19-an-opportunity-for-churches/>

of oxytocin through singing and prayer. I can imagine our ancient Israelite forebears singing these personal words in congregations in unison. I can imagine them reciting or even praying them *together*.

Today's gospel and epistle readings also riff on this theme of togetherness. In today's gospel reading, Jesus speaks words of comfort to his disciples. "Do not let your hearts be troubled," he says. "In my Father's house are many rooms where I'm going to prepare a place for you." Words that are often read at memorial services, because they are so comforting and steadying. What's interesting about this passage is that Jesus speaks to *all* of his listeners as a collective group. The Greek word translated as "you" in this passage is plural in form. When Jesus says, "Do not let *your* hearts be troubled," and "I'm going to prepare a place for *you*," he's speaking to *everyone* as a collective. Southern U.S. English might capture the sense of the Greek best: "I'm going to prepare a place for *y'all*." Jesus is not just speaking to individuals ("you"), or to his disciples ("each one of you"), but to his listeners across the ages ("y'all"). *Y'all* - regardless of time, or tradition, or state in life - have a place. *Y'all* are included. The same grammar rules apply to today's reading from First Peter where the writer uses the same Greek plural. "Y'all," says the writer, are "chosen," "holy," "God's own people" - a people "called" "out of darkness" to live in "marvelous light." *Y'all* - regardless of time, or place, or state in life - are included. *Y'all* are part of this collective community. *Y'all* are *in* instead of *out*. *Y'all, together* are beloved by God.

Even in the midst of social distancing, it's been heart-warming for me to see how people across the world are coming together in unity and oneness - "*y'all-ness*," to use updated biblical language. There was the inspiring story from a few weeks ago of how Palestinian and Israeli healthworkers have set up joint operations to coordinate care for infected patients. One official said, "This is the time to lay aside our differences and work together against the pandemic, which does not distinguish between a Jew and [an] Arab."<sup>5</sup> The virus doesn't observe "boundaries" or "borders," he said. And there was the story of Sarah Fortune, a medical researcher at Harvard.<sup>6</sup> She and her team work at a lab in the School of Public Health in a bio level 3 containment facility where they have to wear N95 personal respirator masks and full-body Tyvek protection suits. Her lab has had to halt all of its research. They saved their data, destroyed cultures they couldn't preserve, and then they donated their masks, suits, and respirators to health care clinics and hospitals. And then there's the story of Lady Gaga, who organized a day-long concert called "One World: Together at Home."<sup>7</sup> Artists around the world participated, singing safely distanced songs from their homes about unity and oneness. I'm sure each one of us could think of other stories of people who have put aside their differences and their own personal interests to serve the collective at this time. In spite of the spate of protests and terrible acts of violence in our country over shutdowns and wearing masks in public, these stories of compassion help us to see our common humanity - our common "*y'all-ness*"; and they help us to see, as the Dalai Lama put it in a recent letter, "compassion in action," "human ingenuity ... and courage to overcome the problems that confront us."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Israel-Palestinians-set-up-joint-operations-room-to-combat-coronavirus-621431>

<sup>6</sup> [https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/03/harvard-research-scales-down/?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=hu-twitter-general&utm\\_source=twitter](https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/03/harvard-research-scales-down/?utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=hu-twitter-general&utm_source=twitter)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/connect/togetherathome/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.dalailama.com/news/2020/a-special-message-from-his-holiness-the-dalai-lama>

Journalist Kathy English of the Toronto *Star* describes this as “the human spirit [that] rises above mayhem and tragedy.”<sup>9</sup> In a recent article, English reflected on the many random tragedies she’s had to cover in her more than 40 years in journalism. “How many times,” she writes, “did I have to knock on the door of the family of a murder victim, or yet another car crash victim, and talk to them about the loved one who had had plans for that same day? How many times was I part of a newsroom mobilized to report on the worst of the random bad things that shocked the world?” “Journalists,” she says, “are on the front lines of bearing witness to the random bad things life brings.” “And now,” she writes, “with this great big global random bad thing called COVID-19 affecting every one of us, like all of you, I am anxious, indeed [I’m] frightened . . . . But here,” she continues, “I draw on [what I’ve learned in my] more than 40 years in journalism . . . . A new day . . . always dawns. . . . This too shall pass,” she says. “Life will go on. Somehow, inexplicably, it always does even in the face of the worst, most painful, and heartbreaking of the random bad things that befall people. . . . The human spirit,” she says, “faced with mayhem and great tragedy, somehow seems to always teach us greater lessons about survival in the face of unimaginable random bad things. . . . I hope,” she concludes, that “we can all remember the best of th[is] human spirit . . . : kindness, generosity, empathy, understanding, strength.” Oneness.

....In the U2 song “Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” - a song we’re going to hear today in a few minutes, and the very song that Wendell Kimbrough heard 80,000 people at FedEx Field singing in unison as their brains released oxytocin, causing them to feel more connected with each other - in that U2 song, Bono sings *I believe in the Kingdom Come / Then all the colors will bleed into one*. A phrase that longs for the day when our common humanity - our common “y’all-ness,” our common spirit filled with God’s spirit - brings us together in community, and makes the things that divide us seem silly and insignificant. Amen.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public\\_editor/2020/03/19/the-human-spirit-always-rises-above-mayhem-and-tragedy.html](https://www.thestar.com/opinion/public_editor/2020/03/19/the-human-spirit-always-rises-above-mayhem-and-tragedy.html)