

LISTEN TO THE MUSIC

Final Week of a 4-Week "Songs of Life" Series

Sunday, May 14, 2023

Rev. Richard Maraj

Listen to the Music – Lyrics:

*Don't you feel it growing, day by day
People getting ready for the news
Some are happy, some are sad
Whoa, gotta let the music play*

*What the people need is a way to make 'em smile
It ain't so hard to do if you know how
Gotta get a message, get it on through
Oh, now mamma don't you ask me why*

*Whoa, oh listen to the music
Whoa, oh listen to the music
Whoa, oh listen to the music
All the time*

*Well I know, you know baby, everything I say
Meet me in the country for a day
We'll be happy, and we'll dance
Oh, we're gonna dance our blues away*

*And if I'm feeling good to you and you're feeling good to me
There ain't nothing we can't do or say
Feeling good, feeling fine
Oh, baby, let the music play*

*Whoa, oh listen to the music
Whoa, oh listen to the music
Whoa, oh listen to the music
All the time*

*Like a lazy flowing river
Surrounding castles in the sky
And the crowd is growing bigger
Listening for the happy sounds
And I got to let them fly*

*Whoa, oh listen to the music
Whoa, oh listen to the music
Whoa, oh listen to the music
All the time*

Message:

So there were these two brothers who were richest and most powerful people in town ... but they were ruthless. They were absolutely mean. They cheated; they lied; they intimidated so many people in their

business life, in their personal life. But the thing was: Everybody in town was afraid of them. Nobody ever said a word. They got away with it.

So one day, one of the brothers died suddenly. And, although they didn't go to church, the other brother went to the local priest and said, "Could we have the funeral there? And if we do, I'll give you a million dollars -- a million dollars for your church -- if you do the funeral. However, the one stipulation is You need to say in the eulogy that my brother was a saint."

The pastor was a little troubled by this request because, while the church needed the money for all kinds of repairs and all kinds of church work they could have done -- he did not want to stand up there and lie - - say something he knew wasn't true, and everyone in town knew it wasn't true.

So he had to go into prayer to figure out how he could handle this situation. So a few of the congregants heard about this dilemma and they were curious what the pastor was going to say during the eulogy.

So the funeral began. He did the prayers and the different rites for a funeral. And then the eulogy began, and some of the folks leaned in, excited to hear what the pastor would say. So he began the eulogy by saying, "As you know, brothers and sisters, the dearly departed was a horrible, horrible man! He was despicable! He did some ruthless, unkind and mean things! But compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

[Congregation laughs] Alright. [Laughs] So how many people would like to feel happier and have at least one thing in your life go a little better than it's currently going? Anybody wants a little ...? Okay. And how many people have been going through a really tough time in your life? And have you ever heard a song or a piece of music that kind of lightened your spirits and elevated your mood? Anybody ever have a song kind of help you through a tough time? And how many people would say you love music, and you listen to music regularly ... even daily? Lovers of music? Okay.

The fact is: We all love music. And to the tune human beings love music that last year we spent globally \$26.2 billion on the music industry. The United States, alone, really loves music, because \$16 billion of that money spent in the music industry was right here in this country.

Music is a powerful and important aspect of all of our lives. In fact, music is engrained and woven in the very fabric of this culture. Think of all the areas that music is involved in and key in. I mean, in entertainment; in advertising; in business; in social life; sports; celebrations. Music is an important part! Weddings; funerals. All parts of our lives have an element of music involved in it.

Do you ever wonder: Where did music come from? How did music start? Do you know researchers and scientists -- while they've found some artifacts of certain things in Asia, in Europe and in Africa -- absolutely agree that they have no idea. They don't know who started singing first! They don't know who developed the first instrument. All they can do surmise some idea that singing kind of started to maybe mimic the birds singing. Or maybe because they were hunting, like, the duck and they had to quack and develop some new ways. Or rocking a baby to sleep and kind of humming and la-la-la-ing or something. And that evolved.

Did you know that every single culture on the planet developed musical instruments? And that singing was a part of their ceremonies and celebrations almost innately. Almost innately, as if music was in us, born to come out to be an aspect of our lives.

In the Bible, it says:

"Enter the Lord's presence with singing and gladness."

"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord."

Psalm 1:50 actually says:

"And use harps and lyres and trumpets and cymbals."

It says to celebrate with music to worship and to connect with God.

Ancient people absolutely believe that music was a gift from God. Mozart wrote all of his music and didn't make one correction. It's like he was taking dictation! He actually said that *"music comes from a place that I don't know, and I am just the vehicle through which it comes."* Michael Jackson said the very, very same thing: that he's just the vehicle through which music comes.

And so when Scripture says, *"The kingdom of God is within you,"* a part of that kingdom is music, I believe. Because it touches us and inspires us in ways that are actually beyond words.

And so we're actually wrapping up our annual "Songs of Life" series where I take famous songs and extract a spiritual message or idea from it. And so in Week #1 we did "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," a 1973 hit by Elton John. Week #2 we did "Now That We've Found Love" by the O'Jays, another 1973 hit. Last week we did Sia's "Unstoppable" from 2016.

And today we're going to go back to the 70s -- 1972 -- for "Listen to the Music" by the Doobie Brothers, written by the lead singer, Tom Johnson.

And he wrote it during the Vietnam War with this feeling that music makes us feel good. And not just feel good; music actually draws people together and unites people. And so he wrote the song with the idea that, if all the world leaders could just come together, sit on a grassy hill, and listen to music -- and realize we have so much more in common than different -- and that we're all in this together, that we would resolve and find peace. And find a way to make a world that works for everyone.

And so, while it seems like a utopian, idealistic view, I really believe the hope, the optimism and the positivity of the song is something that's enduring and a powerful message for all of us in living our lives today.

So this morning I want to talk about three lessons that we can be inspired by from the song, "Listen to the Music."

And the first one is **THE IMPORTANCE OF FEELING GOOD**. And allowing music to help us feel good. I love the opening lines that say:

***Don't you feel it growing, day by day
People getting ready for the news ...***

***What the people need is a way to make 'em smile
It ain't hard to do if you know how***

And so, what he's saying is that everybody wants hope. Everybody wants to know that their coming days will be better. We all want things to make us smile. Because life isn't easy! Life can be a struggle and a challenge and difficulty in our relationships; in our work; finding our own sense of peace and joy and fulfillment. With conflicts and politics, it isn't easy. So we're all looking for better days. We're all looking for things to make us smile.

And what can make us smile? Well, according to him, it's music! Music is the thing that will make us feel good. Music is the thing that'll make this a better world.

And so, think about how you feel when you listen to music. Isn't that a fabulous feeling, whatever that feeling is? Music helps us feel good. And the question is: Why? Why do you think music helps us feel so good? No matter what kind of music we listen to, when we love music, we feel good. Here are four reasons why.

The first thing is that **it activates certain centers in the brain that release dopamine**. And so, when we feel good about music, it actually releases dopamine, serotonin – neurotransmitters -- and it is that part of the brain that celebrates and rewards and gives pleasure. And that's why; it triggers something in our brain to feel good.

The second one is: **It triggers memories and emotions**. Like, you ever heard a song and it triggered a memory, like when you were in high school or something really cool and was kind of fun? It triggers those kind of things to help us reflect and connect with those things emotionally.

And sometimes, with sad songs, it does that, as well. Have you ever played a song that was sad and you felt sad? But you were kind of happy that you felt sad? [Congregation laughs] You know what I'm saying? You actually kind of ... It was almost cathartic. It was almost like a healing and a releasing. Music can make us feel nostalgic and excited and joyful. It can open our hearts in amazing ways.

Here's what I think is great about music: Is that it makes us feel when sometimes we don't allow ourselves to feel. Sometimes music can open our hearts or connect with an emotion that we haven't allowed ourselves to fully process -- if we're grieving; or if we're struggling; or if we're hurting; or we're feeling a sense of unworthiness. Sometimes music can help take us to that place to feel. And to feel good means you need to feel. Feeling good in life authentically is about feeling all the feelings of life. And that's what music has an amazing gift and ability to help us do. It can help us heal and release and have a healthier relationship with our own emotions.

Here's some words by Joseph Campbell, who captured what I think is a way that music helps us feel good. And here's what he said. He said:

"I don't think the meaning of life is what we're seeking. I think it's an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."

The thing that makes us feel good is to feel alive and to feel all of our feelings ... and music helps us do that.

The other thing that makes us feel good about music is that **music makes you want to rock your body!** [Congregation laughs] Tap your toes; bump your head; shake your groove thing; bust-a-move, as Rev. Jimmie would say! [Congregation laughs] Whatever it is ... don't we? You love the groove! You love the groove; you've got to move!

So music stimulates the brain; it connects with our emotions; and it gets our bodies feeling good. I mean, when you go dancing all night, you feel fabulous! There's something about the kinesthetic dynamic of moving that makes it a whole, incredible experience.

Last one is that **music also helps us feel a sense of social connection**. Like when we're listening to music together, or singing a song together, or dancing at a wedding. There's something social -- singing in a choir; being in a band. Us enjoying music together; there's an incredible connection that we feel, as well.

I could go on about music ... because they're using it for therapy with seniors and showing all kinds of improvements in mental acuity and memory; blood pressure going down; less depression; all kinds of good things of how music makes us feel good.

In her book, *The Power of Feeling Good*, Rachel Garrett says that positive feelings -- feeling good; feeling joyful; feeling grateful; feeling inspired; feeling amused; feeling in all awe -- all of those are like "super foods of well-being." That when we feel good ... It is an important thing for us to feel good. To not get stuck in negativity or depression. But the more we feel good, the more alive we feel; the more we attract more good energy; and the more it lifts us, not only out of negativity but up to higher levels of

fulfillment. Listening to music makes a difference! It behooves us to spend time daily listening to music that we like and letting it lift us to that higher place.

I think **music is a connection between our humanity and our spirituality**. That listening to the music also helps us to listen, not just to the outer beat, but the inner beat. Not just to the outer rhythm, but the inner rhythm. Not just the outer impulse, but the inner impulse. Listening to the music makes us feel good and invites us to listen to the still, small voice that is the foundation of all good. That the deeper we are able ... Because music -- as good as it is -- makes us feel good, but it's not as enduring as that spiritual music within ourselves, of connecting with it.

So that's the first thing I think -- the lesson for life -- that this song inspires to: is to feel good by listening to the music and listening to the inner music, as well.

The second one is **THE POWER OF MUSIC TO UNIFY**. To unify and connect. You know, he really believed that music brings us together; music connects us. You ever went to a concert and everybody was singing along with every song? And you know that part when the lead singer puts the microphone out and they're not singing; the band's not playing ... and 10,000 people or whatever are all singing the song and waving together. Isn't that, like, the coolest thing? A whole room of people unified, singing a song?

The only thing I don't like about it is: I paid a lot of money to hear that person sing it. [Congregation laughs] I didn't pay to hear them hold a microphone for me to sing it! [Congregation laughs] Just sayin' ... But the feeling is still good!

So we went to one of those Van Gogh and Vino things a couple of weeks ago. And so they have a little wine and snacks and then you paint. But during the painting, they play music. You ever hear old music and you knew every word to every song? That's what it was like! We were singing along. I mean, Motown songs: "My Girl." Neil Diamond: "Sweet Caroline." "*So good; so good!*" You know it! [Laughs with congregation] And there was something unifying about music.

So let's go back to the words for a second. When he says:

***Meet in the country for a day
And we'll be happy, and we'll dance
And we'll dance our cares away***

***And if I'm feeling good to you and you're feeling good to me
There ain't nothing we can't do or say ...***

And what it's saying is: He doesn't necessarily mean go the country and necessarily dance. He's saying: Let the power of music -- the unifying power of music and love -- bring us together. And to go into the country and dance means to go to that place within us where our hearts are open and we're willing to listen. And we're willing to see and hold a vision of healing and reconciliation and love and care for one another.

And it takes work, but it's important stuff. And that unifying power that is in music is in us. Is in life. It is in God. It is in love.

I came across a quote; it says:

"It's not the love that you didn't get in the past that hurts you; it's the love you withhold sharing today that hurts you more."

So music reminds us of that unifying power. And you know that line that says:

*Like a lazy flowing river
Surrounding castles in the sky
And all the people are gathering ...*

That whole idea is about holding a vision of something better for the future in your life. Something better than what you're experiencing now. And I love how Tom Johnson had that idea: that if we could just get everybody together and listen to music together, we'll see it with our hearts. He saw a world of peace! He saw a world of harmony and possibilities! And yeah; that might seem crazy. But really, is it? It is only when we hold a mindset of the impossible that it becomes possible. To see something that isn't there in our lives right now.

George Bernard Shaw once said:

"Some men see life as it is and ask, 'Why?' And others see it as it might be and ask, 'Why not?'"

So why not? What's a prettier picture in the sky that you could see for your life from what you're experiencing now? Especially when it comes to relationship? So in a relationship you have that's a little rocky -- a little bumpy, not going as well as you'd like -- what is the picture that you can see of it that would be more harmonious? More loving? More positive?

We always talk about having our vision and using our imagination. Why not use it to see a harmonious relationship? Or a reconciliation or healing? If there's someone in your life that you've had a bump-up with, see yourself connecting with them; talking with them; understanding and sharing. And it may not bring you totally to that, but I believe holding that positive intention will make a difference. And including a relationship you have that's good, but you'd like to go deeper? Why not hold a vision of it? Of being more joyful? More loving? More playful? More passionate? More caring and more nurturing?

I mean, why not? Why not see the possibilities and use this unifying power that music and love and God have, that's in us, to help improve our relationships?

And then the last one is to **SING YOUR SONG**. Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote a poem called "The Voiceless." And in it, he wrote:

*"Alas for those that never sing,
But die with all their music in them."*

Sometimes in life, we can feel we have no voice. We can feel that we're not living the life that we want to live. We can feel like we haven't done the things that we want to achieve or become the person that we want to be. And this poem suggests that we're the ones who silence our own voice. That we're the ones who stifle our own dreams. We're the ones who do not speak our own truth. We are the ones who aren't being true to ourselves. We're the ones who hold ourselves back. We're the ones who decide if we die with our songs left unsung.

In Psalm 96:1 it says:

"Sing to the Lord a new song."

That means we can all sing a new song. But sing a new song? The first question we need to ask ourselves is: What song am I singing right now? Are we singing a happy song? Are we singing a sad song? Are we singing a love song? Are we singing a "Somebody Done Somebody Wrong" song? [Congregation laughs]

Somebody said:

"The only sin is to die with your song unsung."

Because that means we will leave this Earth with the gift we came to give undelivered. That we left this Earth with talent we didn't share and love that we did not express.

It's important to ask ourselves the question: What kind of song am I singing? And what kind of song do I want to sing? And what kind of song am I meant to be singing? Just asking the question is a really good start, because it triggers your mind and your heart starting to search.

There's a Cameroonian proverb that I love. And it says:

"He who asks the question cannot avoid the answer."

So are you willing to ask the question? What is the song I'm singing? And what is the song I like or I'm meant to sing? And what is holding me back from singing? The fact is: We're not here to live somebody's else's life or a part of a life or no life at all. We're here to live the life that we're meant to live. To sing the song that's in us.

It doesn't matter what age or stage; as long as we're still living, there's music in us and there's a song to be sung. I know three people who wrote their first book at 80! I have done weddings for several people in their 70s and in their 80s. Love doesn't die! Joy doesn't die! Possibilities don't die! Dreams don't die! As long as we're here, we still have a song to sing.

So what's the new song you want to sing? Is it a song of hope? A song of peace? Is it a song of adventure? Is it a song of passion? Is it a song of triumph? Is it a song of overcoming? Is it a song of understanding? Is it a song of kindness? What is the new song that you want and are called to sing?

So could you imagine life without music? I mean, life without music would be like a flower without petals. It would be like a car without an engine. It would be like pizza without the dough; I'm telling you, it would not be a very good thing! I truly believe that music is one of the great, great, great, great, great gifts. and one of the great joys in life. It makes our lives better; fuller; richer; more joyful and more colorful.

And so what we need to do is to allow it to help us feel good. Feeling good is a good and positive and wonderful thing. It helps us create unity and to hold a vision of whatever relationship being better in our mind as a possibility. And to sing your song!

The one line I didn't mention was:

Listen to the music

All the time ...

All the time; all the time!

Because when we listen to music and God all the time, we'll feel good. When we listen to music, we'll feel that unity and know that there's a possibility to unite our relationships. When we sing all the time, we will sing our own song. And when we do, our lives will be better; our relationships will be better; our world be better. And those are the lessons from the song, "Listen to the Music."

God bless you all. [Congregation applauds]

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