

Stride!

Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel, M.Div.

Summer Minister

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

30 June, 2013

N.B.—These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship—supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer—and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

All photographs are by Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

A scriptural inspiration for this service was *Fragment 1* from the poetry of **Sappho**.

A set of translations of this poem is available at:

<http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/sappho/sape01.htm>

An additional Source was the article “**The Rainbow Connection**” in the 20 June, 2013, edition of *The Grid*. It can be found at:

<http://www.thegridto.com/city/sexuality/the-rainbow-connection/>

The lyrics to the **Battle Hymn of the Republic**, which offered some inspiration for this sermon, are available at:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21566/21566-h/images/battlehymn.pdf>

The music for the tune **John Brown’s Body** can be found here:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/21566/21566-h/music/battlehymn.midi>

A selection of **Additional Lyrics** to the theme, over several decades, is provided at the end of this sermon.



Last week, our quartet shared with us the words and music to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, a song that was a favourite among the Union army in the American Civil War, written by Unitarian writer Julia Ward Howe, and expressing deep support for the abolitionist cause, affirming the inherent worth of each individual, by rejecting a system of slavery.

What I didn’t tell you was the longer story of the tune, which had already been used for some time as an abolitionist anthem. The precise origins are a bit obscure... but what began as a chant with the words “*Say, brothers, will you meet us|On Canaan’s happy shore?*” was eventually scored by William Steffe into the tune that many of you will recognize as *Solidarity Forever*.

For a long time, it was known as *John Brown’s Hymn*.

And who is this John Brown? He was, to many, a champion of the abolitionist cause, inciting his fellow citizens to counter unjust laws; he also refused to own slaves, and in fact, often joined in rebellion with them.

But the story isn't so neat and tidy. John Brown was also known for his extreme methods, and many fellow abolitionists were not always happy to work with him. What became known as the Pottawatomie Massacre is credited to him... and once you have a massacre to your credit, eyebrows are raised. Nonetheless, he became an icon of the cause, and after his execution, he was memorialized to the tune of *Say, Brothers, Will You Meet Us*.

It was an odd way of immortalizing him: "*Old John Brown's body is a-mouldering in the grave*" goes the song. Ah, but Glory, glory, hallelujah—*his soul still marches on!*

His soul must have been marching along when Julia Ward Howe and a friend of hers heard the tune during clashes between the Union and Confederate camps. Her friend suggested that she write an improved version of the song, one that might be more dignified than trumpeting John Brown's dead status...

The spirit seemed to come to her that night and, in the dark, she penned the words to *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*, which is now known across the United States, sung by churches, civil rights organizations, and both major political parties.

The tune is used widely... I remember a version of it from my days at Carleton University. (The lyrics to *that* particular version aren't printed in your insert... and I won't utter them now, other than say they were a neat way of bonding in our rivalry against Ottawa University!)

After the Union army used it, the unions of the labour movement made it their own, with *Solidarity Forever*: "*The Union Makes Us Strong!*" it proclaims. Many feminists took on to the sentiment and made it their own as well, calling upon sisters and brothers to join the struggle toward gender equality (there is a Canadian version in your inserts).

The cooperation movement has also appropriated its own *Battle Hymn*, though with a different approach: "*We are a mighty army*" it sings, "*though we bear no sword or gun*", and the chorus has a peculiar proclamation: "*Come and let us work together|consumers marching on!*" bearing witness to the reality that in an economic world, those of us who have dollar votes also hold incredible power to transform society.

It is telling that the many incarnations of John Brown's theme—the *Battle Hymn*—are so broad, and sometimes tell disparate stories. (The old joke that Unitarians are bad singers—because they're always looking ahead to see if they agree with the lyrics—would not seem out of place here!) And when we invite you in a short while to sing this cloud of lyrics, by different witnesses, you are welcome to cringe at the words that do not reflect your reality or experience...

I also invite you to see if you'd like to try out verbalizing what those other testimonies give witness to!

When riding a streetcar last week, I stumbled upon a copy of *The Grid*, which seems like an entertainment newspaper. There, I found testimonies from a cloud of witnesses that was varied in its experience and story. An article entitled “the Rainbow Connection” interviewed folks with different queer identities, pairing up people of different ages to share their experiences with each other.

As I leafed through it, I was struck by a common thread that nonetheless sounded strikingly different by diverse voices.

Janice and Jabez tell each other their story. Janice was married to a man for 20 years, and it wasn't until she was 40 that she felt she finally figured out her lesbian identity. She is amazed by Jabez and her story of coming out as queer at 16. “Such self awareness!” remarks Janice.

Jabez adds a twist to her story: even with her queer identity, she won't give up her Christian identity. She still goes to her family's conservatively Christian church. She just doesn't buy into notion that she can't keep her faith alongside her sexual orientation. She doesn't advertise when in church, but she refuses to give up either part of herself.



Ramon and Neil are both gay men, but Ramon is 24 and Neil is 73. Neil reminisces about the struggle to live his life as himself in a time and place that made it difficult to do so. Ramon, as a younger gay man, expresses that he has trouble identifying with that reality. He feels fairly at ease in his surroundings, but finds

himself also feeling troubled that Neil's story resonates little with his own. He feels uneasy about living in a time and place that is more accepting of him, without sharing as much in the struggle.

Kim Chee Lee is an 81 year-old gay man. He can't recall ever not being out. He tells the story of coming out to his mother when he was 12. He recalls his conversation with her:

"When I look at boys, at men, I have kind of a fuzzy feeling, and I don't know what that means." She said, "You just like men, that's all. You're gay!" She was very supportive.

Aisha, 20 years old and identifying as queer, asks Lee about the gay scene in Toronto when he arrived, and he acknowledges the secretiveness that was prevalent and necessary at the time, but he also testifies to his commitment to staying true to his self throughout his life. When he reads the *Xtra!* newspaper, he doesn't see it as a "gay newspaper", it's simply a newspaper to him. He finds the articles interesting.

Aisha shares that even at this time, she encounters so many times when homophobia hurts.

I'm amazed at the unexpectedly diverse stories that they give witness to.

To these, I'll add my own story of coming out.

In March, I spoke before all of you, recognizing here that, yes:

I *am* straight.

This was partly a deliberate action, realizing that I hadn't named that part of my identity, and thinking that some of you might be wondering.



For me, it was a fairly easy exercise, but it had seemed to me that, to many of you, it was important to have a better idea of who I am, and what kind of people I'm into.

Though I didn't think it a major acknowledgement, I was nonetheless very intentional about it, and I was still surprised when many of you spoke to me showing your appreciation. One of you, Art Brewer, now president of this congregation, walked up to me at the end of the service, and hugged me, saying: "Thank you, for coming out to me—as straight!"

Sexual identity, after all, matters. And many of you who know Art, will also know that he would have

accepted me no matter what orientation I'd had expressed. But I also know that many of your experiences and stories have been different. I am abundantly aware that when I walk down the street, holding my sweetheart's hand, we can do so with confidence that we won't be called nasty names, or that we need to fear for our safety.

For many people—in this city and in many other parts of the world—that is still not a reality.

My friends, many things have changed, and many still need to. You *still* have to fight for your right to party. And today, we give tribute to the cloud of witnesses that has already shared in much of that struggle. We commemorate it and we celebrate it—with pride!

Glory, glory,
Hallelujah!
Amen

Variations on John Brown's theme

Say, brothers, will you meet us (3x)
On Canaan's happy shore.

John Brown's Hymn (William Weston Patton)

Old John Brown's body lies moldering in the grave,
While weep the sons of bondage whom he ventured all to save;
But tho he lost his life while struggling for the slave,
His soul is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah! (3x)
His soul is marching on.

Battle Hymn of the Republic (Julia Ward Howe)

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord:
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory, hallelujah! (3x)
His truth is marching on.

Solidarity Forever (Ralph Chaplin)

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
But the union makes us strong.

Solidarity forever! (3x)
The union makes us strong.

Solidarity Forever (Canadian Feminist)

Through our sisters and our brothers, we can make our union strong,
For respect and equal value we have done without too long,
We no longer have to tolerate injustices and wrongs,
For the union makes us strong.

Solidarity forever! (3x)

The union makes us strong.

Battle Hymn of Cooperation

Oh, we are a mighty army, though we bear no sword and gun,
We're enlisted 'till the struggle for cooperation's won,
And beneath our banner blazoned "One for all and all for one,"
Consumers marching on!

Come and let us work together (x3)

Consumers marching on!

a 21st Century Rendition (RESQ)

Mine ears have heard the stories of the wonders of the Word,
That has driven understanding only discourse may afford,
It has given inspiration both in discord and accord,
The search for truth goes on!

Following a task eternal (3x)

The search for truth goes on!