**“*Church as Creative Space*”**

**Psalm 66:8-20; Acts 17:22-31**

**6th Sunday of Easter/Mother’s Day**

**Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake**

[Brief summary of the history of Mother’s Day: Julia Ward Howe and Anna Jarvis]

*How many of you have heard of the Eurovision Song Contest?*

The big, boundless, colossal spectacle that is the Eurovision Song Contest was back this past week. This year, 37 countries sent an act to Eurovision, selected through national competitions or internal selections by broadcasters.

Although Ukraine won last year, and by tradition should thus have hosted the Grand Final this year, the ongoing war prevented this. So last year's second-place finisher, the United Kingdom, offered to host on behalf of Ukraine at the M&S Bank Arena in Liverpool, beside the River Mersey in the port city that gave birth to *The Beatles.*

The Eurovision Song Contest *Grand Final*, which was streamed live on Peacock here in the States yesterday at 3:00 p.m. eastern, featured acts from 26 different countries singing their *sequined-jump suited guts out.* Five European countries – the U.K., Spain, France, Germany, and Italy – are guaranteed spots every year, as is the previous year's winner.

Two semi-finals earlier this past week winnowed the remaining competitors to the 20 other acts performing yesterday. The contest introduced some big changes to that voting process this year.

1. There was no jury of experts weighing in this time – it all came down to the viewers, who voted by phone, internet or by Eurovision app (you can’t vote for the act from your home country).
2. For the first time ever, many countries not participating in the contest – including the U.S.! – were allowed to vote, although those votes were summarily lumped together under the hilariously dismissive moniker *"The Rest of the World,"* and carried the aggregate weight of a single participating country.

It’s hard to predict victors in a contest whose past winners have ranged from ABBA to Celine Dion, but the bookmakers have historically been remarkably accurate.

*Spoiler alert: Sweden won this year.*

If you haven’t seen it before, the songs—which are all original--typically fall into a few main categories:

***Bops****:* Up-tempo, egregiously catchy tunes made expressly for the darkest, sweatiest, stickiest dancefloors ... They generally involve backup dancers who haven't had a carb in years.

***Ballads:*** Slow, emotional, achingly sincere. No dancing, no backup dancers, just the performer planting their feet and emoting all over the stage in front of a light show that bathes them in the (Usually Purple) Glow of Performative Melancholy.

***Anthems:*** A subcategory of Ballads, you'll know you're watching an Anthem if it's a stirring, bombastic, heedlessly over-the-top barn-burner about standing up, or looking up, or holding up, or not giving up — something with "up," anyway. Dance moves, if any, are scaled way back in favor of posing defiantly.

For example, some Eurovision songs are made for the *dance floor;* some are made for *lying on the sofa* and staring at a crack in the ceiling while wallowing in regret, stewing in spite, or some artisanal mixture of both. But it cannot be denied: some Eurovision songs are made for the *workout mix.* Witness this year's *Finland entry*, which exists to get you up and moving; imagine a CrossFit instructor shouting at you in Finnish.[[1]](#footnote-1)

A hilarious spoof of the Eurovision Song Contest is the 2020, Will Ferrell film, *Eurovision Song Contest: The Story of Fire Saga,* where Ferrell and Rachel McAdams play hapless, accidental—and not very talented, Eurovision contestants from Iceland, who, you guessed it, end up finding true love in the process.

The reason I like this competition so much is because it’s *a show place for human ingenuity and creativity*—the performers are forced to do everything they possibly can to stand out in a large, crowded field of competitors—and it is simply amazing what some of them are able to come up with year after year.

I want you to think about this in terms of our reading from Acts this morning where the Apostle Paul demonstrates a high degree of ingenuity and creativity himself in a unique sermon that is understated, sober--almost *Presbyterian!* In fact, it’s the exact opposite of the *in-your-face* braggadocio of the Eurovision contestants.

You see, Paul chooses *not* to ram the gospel down the Athenians' throats. He speaks about essential aspects of belief in Christ without naming names, without embellishing life through rose-tinted glasses, and without using scare tactics. Yet the message is still crystal clear: *God created humanity to serve and worship God alone, the one true God, through Christ the resurrected savior.*

He is using some of the skills of a good *storyteller* who knows how to capture his audience’s attention. And he respects his audience enough to avoid talking down to them.

When Paul comes before the Athenians, he does not openly denounce their false gods by name or point fingers and accuse them of being lost and without guidance. *Rather* he acknowledges their journey and their findings, and then shares his own.

Enuma Okoro, a Nigerian-American writer, says: *“I like to imagine that Paul's approach to the unbelievers of Athens allows them to see him as a fellow seeker of knowledge and truth, which makes them more receptive to his message. By meeting them where they are and acknowledging that he has paid attention to their objects of worship, Paul suggests that he takes their journey seriously. He acknowledges what their spiritual and intellectual journey has found. Then he acknowledges his own journey to them and shares what his own search has found.”*

In other words, he believes that what he has found is worth sharing, in fact that it's essential. Part of what Paul shares is his understanding of the human condition. Whatever name you give it, we all spend our lives searching and groping for life and love, and to be claimed. We all hope for the redemption of things we have done and said, and we all spend seasons of our lives erecting a variety of false gods in hopes that they will meet our needs.

This story, in a sense, is like *a good piece of fiction.* When we read or hear powerful stories that ring true to the collective human experience, we respond like the Athenians. We may scoff, mostly because we are not ready for the challenge and responsibility that comes with bearing witness to some truth. Or perhaps something in us resonates so powerfully that we can’t ignore it, and we are intrigued enough to want to hear more. Or we are just overcome and know that our experience of life will never be the same, and we become believers of the truth we have just experienced.

Whatever our response, the fact is that it requires a good storyteller to keep us invested long enough to hear the message. And a good storyteller respects his or her audience’s intelligence, convinces them that they themselves could be within the story, and trusts that his or her job is simply to tell the truth as honestly and earnestly as he or she can, knowing that those who have ears to hear will hear.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is important to understand because the contemporary church can be a creative space for innovation and ingenuity—a place where the needs of people in a rapidly changing world are met in new ways and lives are transformed.

For instance, did you know that in recent years the Presbyterian Church USA has created more than *five-hundred new worshipping communities* all over the country?

It’s part of a major initiative of the PCUSA General Assembly that began in 2012, called *1001 New Worshipping Communities—*and we are now more than halfway to our goal. What that has meant *is a burst of creative ministry* at the grass roots – from new immigrant fellowships to worshipping communities meeting on the beach, in coffee shops, nesting in existing churches.

The Presbytery of Greater Atlanta is one of the most active, with *21* new worshipping communities. About 60 percent of those are immigrant fellowships, according to Lindsay Armstrong, the presbytery’s director of new church development.

Four (three Burmese and a Pan-African congregation) have begun in Clarkson, Georgia, perhaps *“the most diverse square mile in the entire United States*,” with 44 nationalities living there, Armstrong said.

For many of these new worshipping communities, the measure of success is not necessarily owning a building or being formally chartered as a PC(USA) congregation, Armstrong said. Instead, these are *incubators for flexibility and faithfulness.*

What the fellowships need is a denomination with a trial-and-error culture, one that encourages imaginative conversations, provides resources, and points out examples of what’s happening at the grass roots, which catalyzes and incites.

In fact, more than half the participants in the PC(USA)’s new worshipping communities are people of color, according to the Presbyterian Mission Agency. That includes new fellowships of immigrants from all over the world.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But the *1001 Worshipping Communities* initiative is also having success in connecting with population groups that have historically felt estranged from the church.

For example, in March of 2017, the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board awarded four Sam and Helen R. Walton Awards, each worth up to $26,250, to new worshipping communities. Among them: [*Not So Churchy*](http://www.notsochurchy.org/) in New York City.

Mieke Vandersall, a graduate of Union Theological Seminary in New York, founded Not So Churchy in 2011 when she was working as the executive director of Parity, a faith-based LGBTQ organization (although there is no longer a formal relationship between Parity and Not So Churchy). The community meets for worship on the second Monday of each month, using space in a synagogue near Penn Station.

Not So Churchy has assembled a community of about 40 people, including two inquirers who are considering becoming PC(USA) teaching elders. Some grew up in church; others did not; none would have gone to worship in a traditional church on Sunday morning, Vandersall said.

Vandersall described the Not So Churchy community this way: *“Many of us are artistic, underemployed, over-talented people living in New York City, needing places to explore and improvise and be able to play with our experience of the divine.”*

Many in the community identify as queer, she said *– “queer in the sense of strange. There’s something a little bit different about us. And we all want to be in a place where LGBTQ people are not welcomed but included. … We don’t talk about whether we’re accepted in the reign of God, that’s not the conversation. It’s part of our fabric.”*

The Not So Churchy community gathers twice a month – once for worship, and once for a different experience (such as a spirituality workshop, retreat, or service project). The community uses the Slack app to communicate online – sharing responses to sermons, prayer requests, announcements and more.

For each worship service, a new three-person planning team assembles – meeting for several months in advance to interpret the Scripture reading through original music, dance, or art, with the result that the community’s leadership rotates.

*“It’s really beautiful to watch that happen,”* Vandersall said. *“For these folks who have been told that the Bible has been used to condemn them – for them to take biblical readings and interpret and digest them is an incredibly liberating process.”*

One participant described the experience this way: *“I had been without a faith community for nearly a decade when I found Not So Churchy in 2013, and it couldn’t have been at a better time.  It was the kind of community I hadn’t realized I’d been looking for years.  Not So Churchy is one of those incredibly rare places where there isn’t something about who I am that’s a problem.”[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Friends, what creative initiatives might God be calling us to in this place? How could we serve as an incubator for the new things God is doing here and everywhere? How might these beautiful buildings and campus be used to provide safe space for new immigrant groups, and the marginalized, as well? The possibilities are endless, for those who have eyes to see . . .

1. Glen Weldon, *Where the Stage is Littered with Glitter: The Top 10 Acts of Eurovision 2023, NPR, May 11, 2023* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Enuma Okoro, *A Storyteller Who Respects His Audience,* The Christian Century, May 19, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Leslie Scanlan, *Finding New Ways of Being Church: 1001 Worshipping Communities,* Presbyterian Outlook, June 27, 2017 (Updated September 9, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)