



# SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Saint Mark's Episcopal Church  
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Rev. Patricia Matthews

For some of us, the music of Tom Petty was the soundtrack of our generation. His years of making music filled our days and our nights, our road trips and our school dances, with song. In his last interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Petty said this about playing music with his band, The Heartbreakers: "It's bigger than us. I mean, it really is something that drives us in a way. To stop playing is unimaginable to me." He was true to his word; his last concert was at the Hollywood Bowl one week before he died.

Now, as strange as it could sound, I think that this long-haired-rock-and-roll-musician can actually help us imagine something about God. Don't worry, I'm not going directly compare Tom Petty to Jesus - but I will highlight one similarity between the two, and that is this drive that Petty spoke of that told him it was unimaginable to stop making music. Jesus had a similar drive. And I think that drive is key to today's Gospel.

You see, in this scene, Jesus was in his own version of the Hollywood Bowl, playing this big stadium: He was preaching in Jerusalem, at The Temple. And this is all happening the day after his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, during the week just before he died.

At this point in his life, it would be understandable for Jesus to give up. People are not being kind to him. But he has this drive that makes it unimaginable to stop. Even right up to the end, Jesus cannot give up on the music that is in him, this song about what the Kingdom of God is like. And so, he tells this story as a last-ditch effort to reveal who God is – even to those angry and fear-filled priests.

He tells of the vineyard owner, who is tender, and carefully chooses the land, and does everything he can to create a space where good work can happen.

The owner's care continues, as he sends representative after representative to check on the vineyard. It doesn't turn out well. The people he sends all get beaten and killed and stoned.

Then, he makes this completely illogical move – he sends more. I mean, after the first one or two people were killed, we would think he would have said, "Enough!" But no. He keeps reaching out with care, again and again. Eventually, every person he sends is either beaten or killed. It must have been heartbreaking.

Finally, the vineyard owner does the absurd: He sends his son into this violent group. And he does this because the owner has that same drive – the one that says it is unimaginable to stop singing this song, to stop reaching out. And that's the end of the parable. The rest is filled in by the crowd.

By telling this story even as he is facing the last days of his life, even as he is facing a hostile audience, Jesus is still desperately driven to keep singing

the song of the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom, God has tenderly constructed a good creation where we get to do our work.

In the Kingdom, our work is neither to cling to this vineyard nor to own it. Our work is to enjoy it and to use creation freely, as a gift.

And in the Kingdom, God never stops reaching out in love and care. Ever.

Even when humanity rejects God, God reaches out.

Even when humanity beats and stones and kills, God reaches out.

Humanity loses its way all the time, yet God does not give up on us.

Do you ever wonder why? Why God does not give up on us? Because logically, it just doesn't make much sense?

That may be a mystery, but there is an ongoing tradition of theologians wrestling with this question. Here are two.

Catherine of Siena, a 14<sup>th</sup> century theologian, says, "Ponder the fact that you were loved before you ever loved. For God looked within Godself and fell in love with the beauty of God's creature and thus created us." That's why God can't give up on us – because we came from within the nature of God.

Thomas Aquinas would say that God keeps reaching out to us, because we are a work of art, made by God. Aquinas states: "As a work of art manifests the art of the artisan, so the whole world is nothing else than a

representation of the divine wisdom conceived within the mind of the Father.”

What they, and others in our tradition, assert, is that we are each a perfect, divine idea that was held within the heart of God. And that reality connects with this drive in God that makes it unimaginable for God to stop singing this song, to stop reaching out to us. It is an impossibility for God to stop loving us. God knows how easy it is for humanity to start believing false notions about ourselves, ones that lead to destruction, and yet God wants us anyway, because we are God’s.

And Jesus – that man won’t stop singing this song, either. He has this same drive to reach out – even to people who hate him and who want to kill him – because he knows who they are. He knows their violence and anger are simply false versions of themselves, brought about through fear, clinging, control, and possessiveness. But it is unimaginable to Jesus to give up on them. He longs for them to remember that the vineyard, this world, is a gift and that they, that we, are God’s beloved creation.

Sometimes, a few of us listen. We remember from where we came, and we remember that this life is a gift. We realize that our true nature is to be free and open and receptive and capable of singing this same song and reaching out to each other.

When we do finally listen, we become not the tenants who cling and grasp and fear – rather, we become the recipients of the gift of our creation, and we hold this life lightly and with great love. When we really get it, we may even develop this drive that makes it unimaginable not to sing a song of praise back to God.

And this is a time for praise. This is not a time for despair. We were not, and never have been, created for the purpose of hopelessness. We were not created to fear and to cling. Deep in each of us is this drive to never stop singing about hope, to never stop trying to call forth in each other our true, divine, perfect nature. To never stop reminding each other that we all were created within the very being of God.

So whatever violence and fear our world is facing today, whether it is in Las Vegas or in Puerto Rico, or in Little Rock, it is the same violence that Jesus faced. And his response was to sing and sing and sing as loudly as he could.

That is our response, too. We are to sing to the world – loudly – and with as many tools as we possess.

We are in Stewardship Season, so maybe it is a good time to ask ourselves: Where in our lives are we singing this song of praise as a response to God – with our voices, our bodies, our time, and our money? And where are we clinging to our vineyards in fear?

Money may be the hardest thing to use as a song of praise. We may cling to this most tightly, thinking that it will keep us safe, that it is our own vineyard that belongs to us. But even our money is a gift, meant to be used to help all of creation, especially those on the margins, to call forth our true, divine nature and to live into the fullness of who we are created to be. Money is meant to be returned as praise – not just 2% or even 10% - but all of it. A hard task. How do we do it?

We begin with this question: How can we use our money as a song of praise? Then, we start where we are, and we take the next step.

Here's something to chew on: if everyone in this church raised their pledge by 1% of their annual income, then we could fulfill our dream budget. If you haven't seen it, please look it over. It is as beautiful of a song of praise back to God as we could dream up. So pray about it, think about it, and see what song wells up in you as a response to the gift that is our life. Maybe we can all let go of a little more to help bring about the Kingdom of God.

And maybe, Tom Petty had something right when he talked about this drive that made it unimaginable to stop singing. He probably would not have put it in these exact words, but the music he created closed the loop with God. Maybe he knew this life was a gift, and he replied back with unending song. He did this year after year after year – because he couldn't imagine not singing – and in doing so, he returned the creation that he was, back to God.