What was I thinking?

September 19, 2021

Out of context

When I was a student at Indiana University, working on a graduate degree in organ and church music, I was assigned a hymn to learn from the 1982 Episcopal hymnal, our textbook/hymnal (a.k.a. "the bible") for the duration of our sacred music studies. We did study many other hymnals from other denominations, but the '82 hymnal was our standard book, and as heavy as it was, it was never worth taking it out of my book bag. I still have it the shelf in my office, and I consult it often.

The particular hymn we were assigned was *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*. I grew up a good Methodist and knew that text, or thought I did. There are many more stanzas that I didn't know. I also noticed that the Episcopal hymnal had two tunes to go with that text, and neither was the one God wrote for those words, at least not for a Methodist. As I've jokingly written before, we usually assume the tunes and texts we grew up with are "the way God wrote it," and anything else is blasphemy.

As I started learning this tune and the accompaniment, I realized it wasn't a "four-by-four" hymn, meaning four beats per measure, four-part harmony, and four stanzas. In fact, it was hard to know how many beats there were per measure because there was no time signature and the number of beats in each measure kept changing. There was no four-part harmony. Instead, it was a trio with constantly moving eighth notes in the left hand, a pedal part that seemed to jump all over the place, a melody in the right hand (though not like any hymn tune I had seen before), and there was an instrumental part for the introduction, interludes between stanzas (interludes?), and the coda at the end (a coda?), and the instrumental part had a descant for the final

stanza. I thought only sopranos did descants. I had never seen anything like this before.

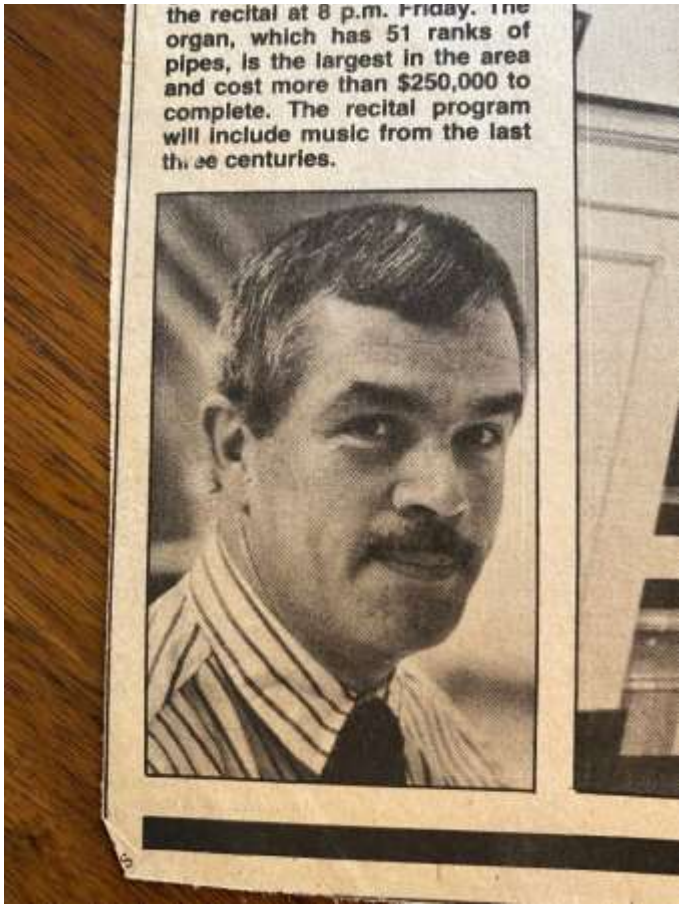
So, I labeled the hymn "hard" and considered it just an assignment, another hoop to jump through in order to earn a graduate degree, something I could say I did but would never do again. I completed the assignment and forgot about the hymn that "no one would ever sing."

In the course of my graduate studies, I began to learn about something else, something no one taught me. It was a life lesson. Some of my classmates, fellow organ students, began to get sick. Colleagues, friends, teachers, all getting very ill, and no one seemed to talk about what was wrong. When I asked, I got answers like "hepatitis" and "pneumonia." I didn't understand. I was naïve. Then they started dying. The classmates were my age or not much older. Even the teachers were not that old. I read obituaries that listed no cause of death. I remember calling one classmate/friend named Myron, who had been very sick himself but had recovered, to ask about another classmate named Tony who had died. I asked Myron how Tony had died. AIDS. No one wanted to say it. I knew part of that was to protect the dignity of the person who had died. I also knew Tony and Myron were both gay and African-American, serving in predominantly white churches. Much of what I grew up with was being challenged. We were classmates at Florida State. Myron became ill with was had been called pneumonia. When I visited him in the hospital in Tallahassee, he looked like little more than a skeleton. He didn't seem responsive, and I assumed he didn't know I was sitting by his bed. I visited Myron a few weeks later, and this time the room was full of other organ students and our teacher. Myron had made a miraculous recovery and was getting back to his old self, which meant he was the life of the party. I told him I had visited him earlier, and he said he was aware I was there. That was all just before I left for Indiana. I learned of Tony's death after moving to Indiana, and that's when I called Myron. A couple of years after that, I heard another organist, colleague, and friend, Howard, had AIDS and was in hospice. He wanted me to come visit. He died before I got the chance.

Then my parents told me my college organ teacher, Dr. Schaeffer, was "retiring" from his jobs at Augusta College and Reid Memorial Presbyterian Church in Augusta. My mother said he was losing his eyesight and he was "kind of giving up." It didn't make sense. Why he could be losing his sight? He was not that old and was very healthy as far as I knew. I had sent a letter to him, but I had no idea he wouldn't be able to read it. I called him a few times, and we had some very moving conversations. He told me he was proud of me (something the crusty old teacher in him never said when I was studying with him!). He told me that since he couldn't see to read music anymore, he couldn't play, and if he couldn't play music, he really had no reason to live. I didn't

understand any of this until I talked to another former teacher who knew Dr. Schaeffer well. He finally said, "the virus is taking over." No one wanted to say it. AIDS. Dr. Schaeffer was dying. On a Christmas break visit to Augusta, I saw him. We didn't talk about his condition, but he did give me some other news – Myron had died. AIDS.

In the summer of 1996, the American Guild of Organists had a national convention in New York City, a centennial celebration. There were organ recitals, concerts, and services in all the big churches in New York. Dr. Schaeffer wanted to go but his doctors advised him not too. He ignored them and went anyway. I got to see him in person one last time at St. Patrick's Cathedral. The place was packed, and the concert/service/meeting/concert seemed to last for four hours. It was very hot so many of us stepped outside to get some fresh air. That's when we talked. Even though he was only 53 years old, two years younger than I am right now, he was no longer strong and healthy. He was thin and slouched, and as I learned later, losing eyesight was sometimes part of AIDS. I didn't know if he could even see me, but it didn't matter. He was too busy telling me the history of the organ in St. Patrick's Cathedral.


the recital at 8 p.m. Friday. The organ, which has 51 ranks of pipes, is the largest in the area and cost more than $250,000 to complete. The recital program will include music from the last three centuries.

It was hard to take all of this in. This disease no one wanted to talk about, AIDS, was taking the lives of my friends, classmates, and my teacher. Tony, Howard, Myron, and others were gone, and Dr. Schaeffer had already lived longer than expected.

As part of that convention, there was a service in memory of those who had died of and those struggling with AIDS. It was held in Calvary Episcopal Church in New York, the church formerly served by Calvin Hampton, a prolific composer of sacred music. The service featured his music. Emotions were already high thinking about the important people in my life that I had lost and my teacher who would be another loss. All suffering from a disease no one wanted to talk about because of the judgement that came with it.

The service including the singing of Psalm 41 and these words:

> My enemies ask in malice, "when will he die,
> and his name with him?"
>
> All who hate me whisper together about me,
> and imagine the worst for me:
> "an evil disease," they say, "has fastened itself upon him,
> and now that he is down, he will never rise again."

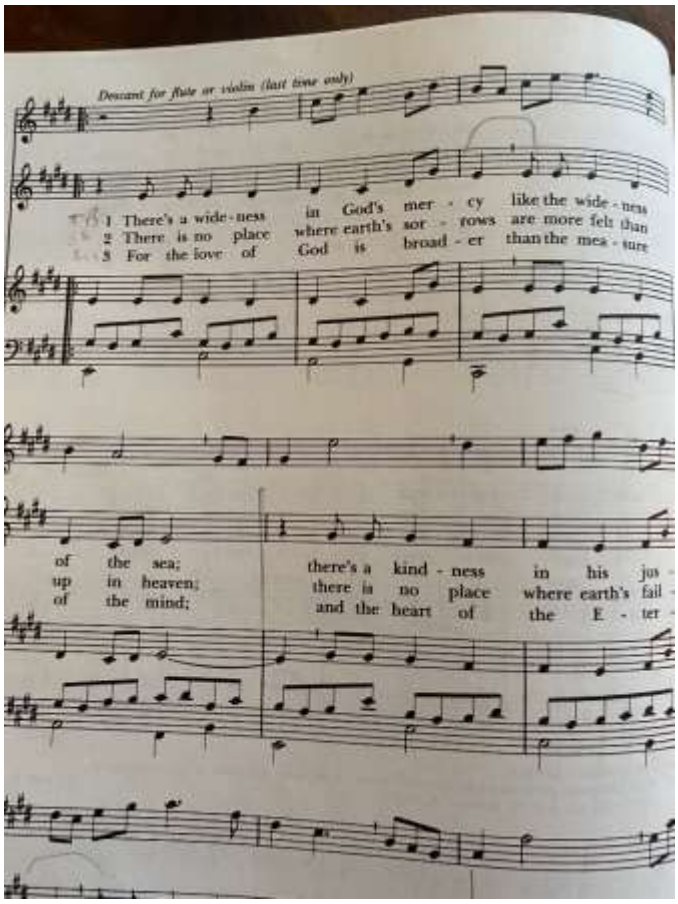
No longer the words of an ancient psalmist, they were true in the present.
But before that psalm was sung, I heard something else, something familiar. The opening hymn for that service was led by a choir and a string orchestra, in addition to the organ. It was sung to a tune written by Calvin Hampton, who had died of AIDS in 1984. As the string orchestra played the introduction, I recognized the tune, and we started to sing:

> There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea.

It was the "difficult hymn that no one would ever sing" I had learned in school, but this time it was beautiful and flowing like gentle waves "like the wideness of the sea." Hampton had written the perfect tune that brought out the meaning of the words like never before.

> There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven;
> there is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given.
> There is plentiful redemption in the blood that has been shed;
> there is joy for all the members in the sorrows of the Head.

When I learned the hymn in school, I really didn't like it. After hearing it in the context of that service, I loved it. I went back to Indiana, and had my choir sing it as an anthem. They loved it. The same thing happened in Atlanta, Winston-Salem, and we've sung it here in this church.



This Sunday, we will hear about God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. That's not a pleasant story and it's understandable that it's hard to find hymns or anthems to fit it specifically. I'm not really a theologian, but I don't think God expects us to literally sacrifice our own children. I think the story can be interpreted as a test of faith, to see if Abraham would do anything God asked. *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy* was probably suggested as a hymn to go with this scripture because it includes the line, "If our love were but more faithful, we should take him as his word; and our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord."

Any time I find a good reason to sing Hampton's hymn, I do it, because it has come to have deep meaning for me. It can be beautiful and meaningful for all who sing and hear it, if it is presented the right way. In the context of school, it was just a "difficult hymn," and it didn't mean much. After experiencing more of life, building

relationships with people, and learning about suffering and death, I hear the hymn in a different way. After hearing and singing it that day in the composer's church, thinking of my friends, teachers, and fellow musicians who were suffering with or who had died of AIDS, I will never again think of it as a bunch of notes to be played or sung. It's music. If I do my job well, follow my calling, and do as my wise teachers have taught me (even in death), you will be just as moved.

God be with you till we meet again.

John