

The Head and the Heart

1 John 4:7-12

Rev. Andrew Connors

Proper 13

July 31, 2022

When composer Phoebe Knapp first played her newest, unnamed melody for her good friend, Fanny Crosby, Crosby had an immediate reaction. The music says, “blessed assurance,” Crosby declared. Her feeling about the melody gave rise to one of the most popular hymns ever written. It’s hard to believe now, but emotions hadn’t played much of a role in most of the history of religion. Our Calvinist tradition was suspicious of any kind of “holy zeal” when it came to worship. John Calvin limited music only to psalms from the Bible set to music. His more severe contemporary in the Reformation, Huldrych Zwingli, had the organ of his Zurich church dragged out of the building in the early 1500s and burned in the public square. What was important in those times was correct doctrine and right teaching. Feeling was at best a distraction, at worst a work of the devil.

Pietism and eventually British and American evangelicalism were, in part, reactions against this kind of rigidity. The conservative evangelicalism of today, more closely aligned with fundamentalism, is a far cry from the evangelical movements of Fanny Crosby’s day which should be seen more as liberal movements against doctrinal rigidity. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism is one important English innovator who paved the way for this later American evangelical movement. Wesley wanted not only to say the right things about God - he wanted to *feel* them. Faith without the experience of faith was not enough for him. At Aldersgate in late May in the evening of 1738 he got his wish. While a member of a society where he was gathered read from Paul’s epistle to the Romans, John Wesley reported, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.”

Although few of us in this congregation would ever describe ourselves as evangelicals, most of us have actually adopted this earlier desire for the *experience* of faith. When people ask you why you go to church, few of you say I go to church to get my doctrine correct. You share words about the *experience* - the experience of the music, the experience of the preaching, the experience of the community, the experience of hope - uplifting, reenergizing. You want your heart strangely warmed, too.

The Christian revivalist movements of the 1870s took Wesley’s pietism to new heights. Preachers took their message out of the confines of church buildings and into mass gatherings of worshipers who wanted their hearts not just warmed, but lit on fire. Fanny Crosby gave Christianity what it was looking for in the hymns that she composed. It’s impossible to know how many she wrote since a number of her hymns were

published under pseudonyms. But most sources put the low end at 8,000 - 3,000 more than Charles Wesley, making her the one of the most prolific hymn writers of all time.

Not everyone is a fan. In our Bible study on Wednesday a number of us were averse to the saccharine, “me and Jesus” feel of Fanny Crosby hymns. Ann Douglas in her book, *The Feminization of American Culture*, blames figures like Crosby for participating in the shift from a “rigorous Calvinism (with its privileging of strength and tenacity),” in the description of one scholar, “to an anti-intellectual and sentimental mass culture that had a profound negative impact on American religion.” It also had a negative impact on women, according to Douglas, because it solidified the idea that women’s gifts were only in the non-intellectual, sentimental arenas.¹

But I think Douglas’ appraisal is a little too harsh. The truth is that a rigorous Calvinism needed a little feeling added to it. Emotional intelligence has historically been undervalued by patriarchal culture. We do need an intellectually honest, thoughtfulness to our faith. But we also need it to kindle within us a drive to do what is good and right. To love with our hearts and our brains, with our intellect and our emotion. Fanny Crosby may have balanced out the scale enabling us to do both.

Crosby was born in a little village called Brewster, about 50 miles north of New York City. She went blind at six months of age. Her father died when she was young, an event which forced her mother into full time employment, so her grandmother raised her. Her grandmother taught her not to think of herself as limited in any way. She learned to read and write at an early age and wrote her first poem at age 8. She also began the discipline of memorizing scripture. By the age of 15 she had memorized the four gospels, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, the Book of Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and many of the Psalms. There’s a lot you can do with your time when you don’t have Netflix.

She was invited to attend the New York Institution for the Blind where she deepened her studies and after graduation stayed on as faculty for a number of years. The school connected her to significant artists, philanthropists, current and future public leaders including Grover Cleveland who served on the faculty of the school during the years that Fanny Crosby was there. People took note of her talent and some of those people were in positions to do something about it. Her poetry came first, her hymnody later.

Fanny Crosby is a great example of what people with obvious disabilities have been trying to teach the rest of us who try to get away with hiding our own disabilities - namely that a disability shouldn’t be viewed only as a deficit, but rather as a difference. And that sometimes a disability in one area is the very thing that gives strength in another. Think about all the holy writ that Fanny Crosby had memorized; the biblical texts that she had taken within her as a part of her memorization. The vocabulary, the

¹ Edith L. Blumhofer, *The Life and Hymns of Fanny Crosby*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2005, Kindle location 116 of 4531.

spirituality, the philosophy that she had breathed in that got reassembled in her mind and breathed back out in her poetry.

Even more, because of her blindness her mother and grandmother had trained her to be independent and self-confident, making her an exception to some of the gender confinements of the time or at least “blurring boundaries of the gendered world of 19th century northeastern Protestants,” in the words of one historian.²

One time, a rather ignorant preacher remarked to Crosby that it was a pity that she could not see because God had given her so many other gifts, to which she replied that if at birth she had been able to make one petition to God it would have been that she would be born blind. I realize that not all deficits bring gifts and that not all people who are blind would make that same wish. I just observe that sometimes our assumed deficits do bring gifts and it takes an attitude of openness to seize them.

It is true that the hymns that she wrote are very individualistic. “Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine” is not exactly what we find in scripture. Perhaps she could have found a poetic way to say, “Blessed Assurance, we belong to Jesus.” But as pastor I know that there are times in our lives when faith is incredibly individualistic by necessity. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death by yourself. When you face a particular kind of loss by yourself. When you struggle with a difficult decision by yourself.

Assurance of God’s love and grace is what many of us crave at those points in our lives where we wonder if we are indeed lovable or worthy or enough because of something we’ve done or left undone, or because we’ve been left out altogether.

The other Crosby hymn that we will sing at the end of worship today, “Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior,” was written after Crosby visited a detention center in 1868. As she was departing, after speaking to the inmates and singing some of her songs to them, she heard one of the inmates cry “Good Lord, do not pass me by.” The hymn, like so much of the Christian faith, puts each of us in the shoes of the prisoner, the oppressed, the overlooked, the undeserving, hoping to be included in God’s grace and God’s love. Fanny Crosby wrote a hymn to help us not only think rational thoughts about that grace, but to articulate the longing that we all have to be included, the desire that we all have to be loved, the hope that we all desire for the goodness of the God of the universe to extend not just philosophically to all of humanity but to me, to you.

On Friday, BUILD met with our young Mayor to share our plan for eliminating vacancy in the city over a 10-15 year period. It’s a daunting task. Every Mayor in my nearly 20 years here has tried to do it and all have failed miserably. The 15,000 vacant number hasn’t gotten smaller despite their best effort. We rolled out a plan that was intellectually rigorous, data driven, proven in 3 neighborhoods, well thought through. We also appealed to the Mayor as a child of the city who knows what it’s like to grow up

² Ibid, Kindle location location 107.

in a neighborhood plagued by abandonment to do something bold and new, to imagine the feeling of leading with a bold vision instead of always reacting to something else.

We appealed to his head and his heart. I thank God that we're a part of a faith that doesn't have to choose between either. Most important decisions in life require both because we worship the God of love who is love itself. And love involves every part of our being.

Karl Barth, arguably the most important theologian of the 20th century, is known for his intellect. The author of many books, his *Church Dogmatics* comes in at over 12,000 pages in the English translations - 12,000 pages. Yet when asked one time to summarize his faith in one sentence, he said simply, "In the words of a hymn I learned on my mother's knee, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'" We don't have to choose between the head and the heart. The hymns of our faith teach us to embrace both.