

Column

Some of the best gifts come in humble wrappings. Take, for example, the little Vacation Bible School song Kumbaya. The melody is plaintive and simple, but the message of the words – though plaintive and simple themselves – are powerful and very full of comfort.

While the actual origin of the song is disputed, most cultural historians believe it to have been brought by African slaves to islands off South Carolina and Georgia where it was sung in the Gullah dialect. From the South, the song spread to the North and then to places outside the United States. In 1926, Harvard-educated musical folklorist Robert Winslow Gordon made the first recording of the song. Later, such artists as Joan Baez to Pete Seeger would further popularize it.

A more recent development happened in 2017 when Dr. Griffin Lotson, Federal Commissioner on the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Commission and the Mayor Pro Tem of Darien, Ga., mounted a successful effort to get the song recognized as the

official State Historical Song of Georgia. The Georgia Senate passed a resolution making it so in February of that year.

What makes the song so powerful is that like most Negro Spirituals Kumbaya has a very personal message: Come by me. Come by me when working out in the hot sun while tending agricultural crops Come by me in quiet moments when praying. Come by me in times of sorrow, adversity and perplexity. Come by me in times of great joy and celebration.”

One might say that Kumbaya is a song for all seasons. It transcends race and place and time. It says in a single Gulla word what another beloved hymn says in multiple words, “I need thee every hour, in joy or pain; Come quickly and abide, or life is vain.”

More than a message for the mind, both hymns address the heart. Last Sunday the choir of the church I serve sang an arrangement of Kumbaya that brought about a holy hush. Some found tears coming to their eyes. When I stood up to preach, I found myself telling the congregation that I felt at a loss for

words. I told them that whatever you get from the sermon, hold onto the message of the anthem. When you get up in the morning, before you go to bed at night, when you are faced with temptation to do wrong, when handed some great challenge, when heading into uncharted territory in your life, say, “Lord, come by me.”

Somber though these words are they can also have celebratory ring. Once while in Oxford for summer school, I took some students punting on the Iris River. In case you are not familiar with the term, a punt is a flat-bottom boat which is both thrust forward and steered by someone standing on a raised area at the rear with a long pole.

On this occasion, I had on board a young Nigerian who served as the principal of a theological college. He was a bit scared of water, as he said many of his countrymen were. Nevertheless, he cast care aside and boarded with his colorful native robe blowing in the wind behind him. What turned this trip into a time of celebration was his leading the passengers in singing Kumbaya. No matter how dodgy the man at the rear with the pole (me), we had

someone greater standing by us. So, it is in all of life. Don't overlook gifts in humble wrappings.

WE beseech thee, Almighty God, look upon the hearty desires of thy humble servants, and stretch forth the right hand of thy Majesty, to be our defence against all our enemies; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Third Sunday in Lent, Book of Common Prayer)

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