

The Red and the Black

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Let me share with you one of the things that brings me joy here in our sanctuary. Sitting side by side in every pew are the Red Hymnal and the Black Hymnal. One has been the standard for many decades. The other showed up fairly recently as a gift from the First Congregational Church in Greenfield.

To me, these two hymnals sitting side by side symbolize our willingness to embrace diversity because the two seem quite different, although in many ways they are not so different.

The Red Hymnal and the Black Hymnal are like people from two generations sitting side by side. One was born in 1931, the other in 1995. One is, in many ways the parent of the other; born of the same Christian tradition, both share the same genetics, but have been shaped in different ways by their times and in ways that seem to put them in disagreement with each other. Both hymnals bring unique gifts to the life of the congregation.

There is an elegance to the poetry and turn of phrase in the Red Hymnal that lifts up it's meaning and message in a way that often seems lost on the Black Hymnal.

I opened the Red Hymnal to a random page and read there the first line of hymn 174.

“Throned upon the awful tree, King of grief, I watch with thee.
Darkness veils thine anguished face; none its lines of woe can
trace; None can tell what pangs unknown, hold thee silent and
alone.”

Very nice. It feels good to sing lines that are so well crafted and full of rich imagery.

I feel very protective of this hymnal. Somewhere between its publication and the publication of the Black Hymnal most people stopped reading poetry and turned to language that is less floral; more everyday, practical and simplified. And the result shows up in places in the Black Hymnal as language that is less beautiful or nuanced, but more theologically up to date.

What is most difficult for me about the Red Hymnal is that it was written at a time in which women's names were hidden behind their

husband's names and the existence and contribution of women in the public realm was hidden by the language. As I grew up and observed the world for myself, it did seem to me that this was unfair. It made it seem as though women should not have agency in the public realm. And my feeling was that, if a woman was more capable than her male counterpart in any job, she should get the job and the credit. And I know that for many people my age or younger, this would be a real sticking point.

That makes me sad, because there is so much beauty and so much good in that hymnal that would be lost if we were to throw it out. We should be able to be forgiving of it for its flaws and enjoy the fact that along with their shortcomings, come many strengths.

I feel the same way about the Black Hymnal. Although it lacks the poetic elegance of the Red Hymnal, it is refreshingly inclusive. It was put together in a world where every other restaurant is an ethnic restaurant, your neighbor could be from any country in the world, and jet planes and long distance calls had made the world a much more integrated place. None of this was so, when the Red Hymnal was written.

And yet the two hymnals show a remarkable amount of agreement on the basic commitments of the Christian life.

I was born between these two hymnals, but my experience is closer to that of the Black Hymnal. In fact, my musical formation had very little to do with hymnals at all.

My parents were Classical Music lovers. My mom went to college to study piano and played a lot of Beethoven, Chopin, Mozart in the house, while I was growing up.

Somewhere around the age of twelve I discovered the record store. I was a post 60's teenager, and I and my peers were hearing about Woodstock, buying Beatles albums, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd.

My parents couldn't hardly hide their disdain for the music I was listening to or for the long hair that went along with it. It all sounded like rubbish to them; too loud and too much repetition.

“Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Na, Hey Jude” (repeat).

The original version repeats this line over and over for three minutes and fifty seven seconds. It must have been torture to their ears.

But for me it is still true today that Rock and roll, Jazz, Blues, Big Band and Salsa are the music I feel closest too, and although I like hymns and church music a lot, they are not what I listen to outside of church.

A New Thing?

What got me thinking about the two hymnals, was one of the verses in the Old Testament reading.

Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old, (says God) I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?

I think it is a popular verse because it expresses the desire of many in the church to turn the page on the past and chart a new course into the future. And I do agree that congregations need to be forward looking and ask what new thing God is doing. But I also don't want to forget the older things. I feel as though the Red Hymnal and the Black Hymnal symbolize two different generations,

and that it is easy to reject one for the other, because one connects more with our experience as part of a generation than the other.

I like seeing the hymnals sitting side by side, because I think that it symbolizes our unity in diversity; it symbolizes our sitting together with each other and sharing our strengths with each other and forgiving each other's weaknesses as well.