

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 12/1/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

I was fortunate in seminary to have completed an independent study on the subject, “Theology of Culture,” with Dr. Richard Jensen. (Dr. Jensen was a friend of my father’s family. He was my dad’s best man, and my grandmother had been “little Dicky Jensen’s” Sunday school teacher.) Dr. Jensen did his doctoral thesis on “The Theology of Bob Dylan.” Theology of Culture, first proposed by Dr. Paul Tillich, is a branch of theology that, among other things, looks at creative statements made in music, art, writing, movies, and other genres to see how GOD might be speaking through them. The idea is that each creative statement is one of “ultimate concern,” or the thing that is most front in the creator’s mind, and that these creations then reflect GOD’S “voice” through them. Dr. Jensen looked at the different phases of singer Bob Dylan’s music and what was happening in his life in each stage to see how GOD was speaking to and through Dylan.

My independent study with Dr. Jensen was on “The Theology of Paul Simon,” of Simon and Garfunkel. Simon, like Bob Dylan, has gone through several phases in his musical writing, influence by his life situation at the time. For example, though Simon denies that one had anything to do with the other, he wrote, “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover,” following his divorce. I believe that the song and particularly the chorus clearly reflect the influence divorce had on him as he composed it:

The problem is all inside your head, she said to me
The answer is easy if you take it logically
I'd like to help you in your struggle to be free
There must be fifty ways to leave your lover

You just slip out the back, Jack
Make a new plan, Stan
You don't need to be coy, Roy
Just get yourself free
Hop on the bus, Gus
You don't need to discuss much
Just drop off the key, Lee
And get yourself free

(I apologize if you have this song stuck in your head for the rest of the day!)

What I found most interesting in Paul Simon’s music is how he could write such depressing songs with wonderful, upbeat music. Or even be humorous about such a tragic experience in life. It is as though, in the midst of hardship, or suffering, or sadness, there is still this glimmer of hope. I believe that is a GOD message. Think about Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony which he wrote after having completely lost his hearing. That symphony ends with the remarkable and glorious “Ode to Joy.” How could someone write such uplifting and beautiful music after having lost the sense that was so valuable to who he was as a composer? Or Scarlet O’Hara’s closing words in the movie, “Gone with the Wind,” that “After all, tomorrow is another day.” Though her marriage had ended, and the South had experience defeat in the Civil War, she would not be overcome. There was still hope.

There are many messages that we can find in the efforts of creative people. I believe that GOD is also speaking through these creative statements of ultimate concern. Take a few moments when you are moved by something you're watching or hearing or reading and ask, "GOD, what are you saying to me?" and perhaps discover yet another way that GOD is present with us and active in our lives.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey