

A "Song" of Celebration

Rock Spring Congregational United Church of Christ

Rev. Dr. Kathryn Nystrand Dwyer

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Psalm 100

¹ Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

² Serve the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

³ Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him; bless his name.

⁵ For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever
and his faithfulness to all generations.

Exodus 15:2 – Katy Nolan

The Lord is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him;
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Verse 1: Finding One's Place

Today's "sermon" is designed to be a Song of Celebration with four "verses" and "chorus." Given that I am the one sharing the verses this morning, you will be happy to know the verses will be spoken rather than sung!

When Elizabeth was just seven or eight, her family was church shopping. Elizabeth sat in this sanctuary and watched and listened as the Choristers sang. She turned to her Mom and said, "Let's come back. I want to sing in that choir."

I spoke with Teal Hugo, one of the directors of that children's choir, this week. Teal now lives in Maine and often watches our service online. Elizabeth will always be "Beth" to Teal, and back then the choir was called the Junior Choir, not Choristers.

Teal remembers how it was clear that Beth was a gifted and talented musician from the moment she joined the choir. She liked to sing, and during the time that Teal helped lead the choir they did the musical, "Jonah: You Can't Run Away from the Lord." Her role was King Nebuchadnezzar. Teal remembers how Beth's mom, Daena, got her the most fabulous costume for her that had a crown, a long beard, and everything.

Teal shared with me that when Beth graduated from the Junior Choir and went on to the Youth Choir, Sharon Hall and Martha Shinn were the youth choir directors and provided a great musical background for Elizabeth there.

In the midst of these remembrances Teal recounted that Beth went through a giggly and silly phase when she was about 15 years. Beth was in the Yorktown Madrigals, and the Madrigals came to Rock Spring and did a second Sunday concert in the early evening.

And then she went off to Indiana University. Teal described how everyone looked forward to when Beth would come home and sing a solo.

When our former director, Michael Howe, left, Elizabeth was asked to be the interim director by Chuck Wildman. Chuck wanted to be sure that I extend his congratulations and best wishes to you Elizabeth! He shared that after a substantial search for Michael's replacement, the congregation turned to you and to the many gifts you brought to the role and never once looked back.

Of all the things Teal shared with me and touched me the most was when she talked about the full circle moment. When Elizabeth began conducting the Sanctuary choir, Teal was singing under Elizabeth's direction. Teal had helped Elizabeth find her place and then Elizabeth was helping Teal find hers.

Elizabeth has helped so many people find their place and their voice here at Rock Spring over the past 24 years. Marty Martinage shared with me, *"One of the biggest things I gained from*

my time in Choristers and Youth Choir was a belief in my own voice. From the time I was a squeaky little kid in 100% Chance of Rain to performing in a trio with Sofia and Leah in high school, Elizabeth always believed in me as a strong and valuable singer — even though a confidence in my voice is NOT something I've really ever had. I loved singing, and still do, in part because Elizabeth gave me a space to sing, even when I didn't quite believe I deserved the opportunities she gave me to share my voice with our congregation.”

Whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Church is a place to find one's place.

Chorus: *Somewhere* from West Side Story - Michael Jolkovski, saxophone; Becky Halbe, flute; Megan Tetrick, bassoon

Verse 2: Church as Community

When the announcement was made that Elizabeth would be leaving Rock Spring, we began hearing from community partners such as the Clarion Brass who offered their music today as a gift to Elizabeth. Susan Robinson told us how instrumental (pun intended) Elizabeth was in introducing her group IBIS to Rock Spring. Elizabeth cultivated relationships that served not only Rock Spring but the wider community.

Elizabeth created the Rock Spring Recital Series as a way to make fine quality classical music accessible, regardless of the ability to purchase a ticket, and for every age. We have wonderful memories of some of the concerts for children when kids would be invited to come sit close and, afterwards, touch instruments like violins and harps.

Church as community. There are many ways this is known: in the wider community, the church community, the choir family as community, and with staff. In some of these settings, “Elizabeth and Ed” are a phrase, like one name, working together and supporting one another, often in ways that may be so seamless they don't even think about.

As I tried to get my head around a way to talk about this, I turned to one of my favorite books, *The Art of Possibility*. It was written by Benjamin and Rosamund Zander. Benjamin is the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra. In his book he describes a game he started called, the contribution game. Here is how it goes.

1. Declare yourself to be a contribution
2. Throw yourself into life as someone who makes a difference, accepting that you may not understand how or why.

Unlike success and failure contribution has no other side. It is not arrived at by comparison. All at once the fearful question, ‘Is it enough? Or am I loved for what I have accomplished? Can be replaced by a more joyful question, “How will I be a contribution today?”

Benjamin would ask his students to play this game, and one of his students named Rachel, after giving it a try, wrote this:

I am not able to use the possibility that every act can affect the world to community with people in such a way so that a wave of inspiration and happiness can flow throughout the world. I know now that music is not about fingers or bows or strings, but rather a connective vibration flowing through all human beings, like a heartbeat. It is my job and ambition to keep that invisible and easily cut lifeline free and supported in all parts of life.

Ed and Elizabeth played the connection game. They have a synergy with one another – and we have all benefitted from that.

When Gail Howell first arrived at Rock Spring, she remembers that the congregation was praying for a young member named Elizabeth Kluegel who was undergoing cancer treatments. One Christmas Eve, an angelic woman appeared with a lit candle at the back of the sanctuary who sang a beautiful rendition of *I Wonder as I Wander*. Gail turned to the congregant next to her and asked who she was and was told it was Elizabeth Kluegel. Since that time over twenty-five years ago, she has graced our congregation with her lovely singing, bringing joy to countless Christmas Eves. More importantly, though, is how Elizabeth used her voice to bring comfort and hope to grieving family members during many memorial services and to the wider congregation in the depths of the pandemic.

So much was challenging during the pandemic, but perhaps nothing as much as music.

Elizabeth led choirs through the pandemic over Zoom, with masks and separation, recognizing that the choir is a community that is about more than singing. And nearly every week for more than a year Elizabeth would select, rehearse, and perform a solo for our online-only worship services. We were so fortunate to have a music director who had such a fine voice – throughout these 24 years and perhaps especially during the pandemic. Your weekly offering, Elizabeth – carefully selected to coordinate with the theme of the day – provided strength, comfort and joy during that difficult time.

Chorus: *Sois La Semilla* - Eduardo Castro

Scripture: Exodus 15:2 – Katy Nolan

Verse 3: Music as Connection To Each Other & to God

Gail Howell remembers that at the time the last music director left, the volunteer who had directed the children's choir had passed away. One of those volunteers told Gail that we would NEVER get busy children to join choirs again. But she didn't reckon with Elizabeth's enthusiasm and creativity! We in the choir have been able to see the joy and encouragement on Elizabeth's face as she has conducted the Choristers and Youth Choirs through the years. And we also get to see the joyful response of the entire congregation to our children's voices. I must admit that

the congregation does not get to see Elizabeth wince when the Sanctuary Choir's performance runs off the rails. But thankfully that has been an infrequent experience. Her care for all her musicians, young and old, has created a cohesive family who enjoys their ministry to the congregation.

Becky Halbe shared that she has experienced a lot of music directors, from church choirs, school choirs, marching bands, Youth Symphonies, and so on. Elizabeth is unique in her ability to hear a wrong note or other mistake and correct it without calling out or embarrassing any one individual. She'll work with the whole section to fix the error, which allows choir members to save face and not feel ashamed or singled out. Everyone is welcome, and everyone is valued.

Phil Shull shared that for past 24 years, "Elizabeth" and "Rock Spring Choir" have become almost synonymous. Like the old song about "Love and Marriage," it is hard to think of one without the other.

He wrote, "What made Elizabeth such a superb choir director was not any **one** thing she did, but the hundreds of things she did and said many thousands of times. Certain phrases spring to mind, "Breath Support!" "Basses, you're gargling again!" "Tenors, that was LOVELY!"

But the magic thread that tied it all together was that Elizabeth ensured that Rock Spring's choirs served the fundamental goal of every community church choir: to use the unique power of blended voices to move our hearts, to enrich our souls, to uplift our spirits, to inspire us to be a better person and a better people, and to unite us all in one accord.

Michael Bell shared with me how Elizabeth touched his family's lives in many musical ways, and others besides. Long before she directed music, she was babysitter for at least one child, Jonathan, who went on to become one of her voice students all the way through his senior recital. Each of their (Michael and Valerie) children sang in the children's and youth choirs. And through countless years Elizabeth was Valerie's choir director. Valerie loved Elizabeth's wonderful voice and poise. In turn, Elizabeth would turn to Valerie for all sorts: to hold the long notes for the sopranos, for choir parties, for the correct (British) pronunciations of certain words, and for frequent moments of hilarity. "Choir" was central to Valerie's life, even when she developed dementia, and Elizabeth patiently encouraged her to keep singing, long after she could no longer keep her folder in order or didn't really know which piece was coming next.

Music connects us to one another and to God.

Make my Life an Alleluia

He's Got the Whole World in His Hands

We are Not Alone.

Whether you are a member of a choir, someone who belts out hymns in the pews or in the shower, or sits and listens and lets music speak to you in ways that words cannot, music connects us to one another and to God.

Chorus: *This is The Day That the Lord Has Made* - The Sanctuary Choir

Verse 4: Sharing Our Gifts

Elizabeth, you have shared your tremendous gifts with us. There are so many memorable moments: *He's Got the Whole World in His Hands* at Macedonia Baptist Church or at the Parker Lecture. *O Holy Night* on Christmas Eve. We talked this morning about many of the gifts you have shared with us, and one that truly stands out is your gift with working with children.

Just because you are leaving the church, doesn't mean your ministry is ending. You love children and you are so good with them. Whatever happens tomorrow at the start of school, no child will ever say they don't feel loved by you. You build children up and accept them for who they are. You light up when leading them in song.

So, as you leave this specific role, receive our gratitude for what has been and receive our blessing – filled with hope and joy for what will be.

Amen.

Chorus: *Love Your Neighbor* - The Choristers