

## **“The Beatles and the Spiritual Transformation of the 1960’s”**

Sermon for September 18, 2011 by The Rev. Joe Summers

*Texts for the day: Jonah 3:10-4:11 and Matthew 20:1-6*

Collectively Sing: “I want to hold your hand” (Lennon,/McCartney, 1963) and “Can’t buy me love” (McCartney, 1964)

### ***Part I: The Early Years: The Beatles and Presence***

Feb. 10th, 1964 was a cold Monday morning. I was in the third grade, and in the winter we would go into the basement cafeteria and wait in line to be let up into our classrooms. But that morning when I went in I found many of the kids were standing on the cafeteria tables singing: “I want to hold your hand.” The Beatles had performed it the night before on the Ed Sullivan Show. I had missed that show because we didn’t have a TV. I didn’t miss them when they appeared the next two Sunday nights, because it was clear something major was happening.

The effect the Beatles had on my little grade school in St. Louis Missouri was not only immediate, it was long lasting. Instantly, many of the boys began to grow their hair longish--that is, crew cuts had been the norm, so even if you had hair slightly longer than mine, people would say that you looked like a girl. Girls and boys had never interacted much, but now girls chased the boys around the playground trying to kiss them and take off their clothes, so we sometimes had to hide in the boy’s bathroom at recess. It scared me, but I loved it. It was like one day everything was a certain way, then the next day you discovered everything was different than how it had seemed. Life and the world were fluid, not fixed.

For the next several years, many afternoons after school, my friends and I would go to my house and sing along to the Beatles records, pretending to play guitars and drums --clearly with the hope that one day we too might be Beatles. When “A Hard Day’s Night” came out, I went and saw it eighteen times at the local movie theater. The first three times, you could barely hear the music; there was so much screaming in the theater.

Why did The Beatles have such a huge impact?

In retrospect, I suspect the joy they unleashed was probably somewhat related to our nation’s still grieving the death of President Kennedy, who had been assassinated three months before. It gave us a reason to believe that life could still be good. But I think it was much more than that; I think the Beatles and their music offered a way to transform a culture needing and wanting to change.

The Beatles said heaven on earth is possible--even for working people. They said life could be fun. For those of us who grew up always hearing that we should sacrifice today to be prepared for whatever trouble comes in the future, the Beatles said it’s also important to have your joy now. They said love was the core of what’s important in life.

Coming out of World War II there was a kind of obsession with good order and living according to the rules. You were instructed to conform, that is, to live from the outside in. A civilization that had come close to destroying itself twice in the previous 50 years wanted good order. In the U.S. this meant thick lines that were meant to define hierarchies around things like race, gender, and class. Those who, like the Beatniks, tried to talk about the silence and sadness that lay beneath this well-ordered surface found themselves marginalized and isolated. But now suddenly, in something like a kind of spiritual tsunami, the Beatles come in like the Marx Brothers, playfully creating chaos and seeming to turn everything on its head.

Above all--they were present. They weren't living from the outside in. They were living from the inside out and living in relation to others and the world. Living this way was enlivening, and it made them act in unexpected ways- again and again. Living this way seemed to bring them joy and brought joy to others.

One of the signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the ability to be creative. Jesus is always doing and saying something that surprises those around him, because he's not confined by the scripts that define them. Jesus calls for things to be done on earth as they are in heaven, and today we hear that heaven is like a place where everyone gets what they need, even if they haven't worked as much as the person next to them. It's the kind of vision that led the early church to give "to each according to their need" (Acts 3:45), but it still jars our sense that, if we work harder, we should get paid more. It's the same kind of surprise we hear in the book of Jonah where Jonah is angry when God saves the Ninevites, the enemies of Israel. The Holy Spirit always seems to be about this kind of surprise, which is why, so much of the time, we see it working outside of religious institutions, doing things that religious people often wouldn't approve of, or think of, as the work of the Spirit, things like: Jazz (which is born in bars!), or the rise of movements like the labor movement, the feminist movement, the ecology movement, and the LGBT equality movement, movements which we've come to see were movements of the Holy Spirit, but which, when they began, weren't seen as such.

In retrospect, part of the spiritual revolution of the Rock and Roll of the 1960's was about being mesmerized by presence: the ability to be spontaneous, to feel what you feel and to express it and act on it. I once asked Dave Clark, the leader of the Dave Clark Five, about this. He said that, in his life, he never was more able to be spontaneous, more able to be present, than when he was on stage during that time. Seeing others be present in public helped many of us believe we might be able to be present in our own lives.

Happiness and joy so often seemed elusive or manufactured, like the kind of fantasy one experiences in darkened movie theaters. Now, in songs like "I want to hold your hand" and "Can't buy me love", they not only seemed possible, they seemed unstoppable.

Collectively Sing: "I'm looking through you" (McCartney, 1965) and "For no one" (McCartney, 1966)

## ***Part II: The Middle Years: The Beatles and Love***

Christianity was born in a wave of love that poured out in the ancient Roman world. Today it and many other world religions claim to be all about love. Yet, often our practices and the way we talk are far from that reality. But through their music, the Beatles helped to put the issue of love front and center to our culture.

Their evolving vision of love is reflected in at least three different periods in their music. The early period, which goes from their first album through *Help*, is a period in which they sang one love song after another. In this period, even when they are singing “O dear what can I do; my baby’s in black and I feel blue,” or “I don’t want to spoil the party, so I’ll go,” there is still such a sense of being so in love with love, that there’s a tangible sense of pleasure even in missing your love.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Dostoevsky, one of the characters, Father Zossima, says love in dreams is beautiful, heroic, and infinitely rewarding; but in reality “love is a harsh and dreadful thing.” In the second period of the Beatles music, which goes from *Rubber Soul* through *Magical Mystery Tour*, we see something of this changing perspective, as the Beatles increasingly shift from the dream of love to its reality.

The songs on *Rubber Soul* are still mostly about love, but the emotional range is much broader and deeper, as it ranges from simple love songs to songs about love lost and love thwarted, to the implicit critique of sexism in “Baby you can drive my car”, to the anthem to love, “The Word.” Though the title of *Rubber Soul* is meant to be humorous, it’s well named, for it’s about finding real soul, real connection, in the midst of the modern world of rubber and vinyl. Part of that real connection to our inner life is about all the ambiguity and complexity of love: “I’m looking through you--where did you go?.. Love has a nasty habit of disappearing overnight”, or, “No sign of love behind the tears.. a love that should have lasted years”. When I walk through a terrible dark night of the soul, two songs from *Rubber Soul* were among the few connections back to myself.

*Rubber Soul* was followed by albums like “*Revolver*”, “*Sgt. Pepper’s*”, “*Magical Mystery Tour*”, and what most call “*The White Album*”. Through these albums the Beatles expressed a Bob Dylan-like willingness to explore anything and everything: various kinds of relationships, work, daily life, aging, religion, drugs, addiction, mental illness, violence, war, and revolution. Their music explored such issues as an exploration of the heart, our hearts. In the process they helped us find a language for the tragedy that many of us were experiencing as the civil rights movement, and the anti-war movement helped us to see more clearly the reality of life in a country that upheld equality but practiced slavery, upheld democracy while pursuing imperialism, talked about individualism while encouraging conformity, a country in which deeply entrenched powers were determined to preserve this status quo at all costs; a country whose culture and history had profoundly shaped our inner lives.

Collectively Sing: “Black Bird” (Lennon,/McCartney, 1968)

### ***Part Three: The Late Years and the Challenge Ahead***

“The White Album” came out 1968 and helped lay out the depths of the darkness going on inside us and among us. After “The White Album” came “Abby Road” in 1969 and “Let it be” in 1970. In these last albums we hear in songs like “Let it be” and “Here Comes the Sun,” prayers, songs about how to keep one’s soul alive in a world of such darkness.

Don Anderson was a former member of this parish. When he was in high school, Don broke his neck in a diving accident. It was in the music of the Beatles that Don found a spirituality that enabled him to come to grips with himself and his new life and to preserve his inner life in the midst of a world where everyone seemed to want to put him in one kind of box or another. Ever since Don discovered that, it’s had me thinking about the spirituality of the Beatles and why it was so profound.

In the face of this kind of suffering, of being an adventurous and athletic young man condemned to live life in a wheelchair, talk about presence seems so ephemeral, so insubstantial; yet increasingly, I believe it is only in presence that we find the strength to endure such adversity and the vision to create the lives and world we want to create. Through the gift of their presence, the Beatles helped give courage to a generation to define our lives and our world honestly, and yet also with wit and grace, humor and love.

What the Beatles meant to me and so many in my generation is, I think, perhaps most akin to what Harry Potter has meant to my children and so many in this generation. Just as the Beatles did for me, so the Harry Potter series has been a doorway to becoming present to our time by giving us language and images that express the range of feelings that this time evokes, and who we want to be in the midst of it. In the process, JK Rowling has helped us to honor our experience, and you can’t become present, or experience presence, until you honor your experience. Ultimately, I think, both the Beatles music and the Harry Potter series testify that, what can sustain us, and give us the power to overcome, is this ability to be present to ourselves, to each other and to the universe. Cultural domination is so devastating, because, when we impose forms of thinking or feeling on ourselves, it cuts us off from ourselves, leaving us desolate, lonely, deprived of the enormous energy and vision that comes from being connected to the Creating Spirit within us and deprived of the enormous strength that comes from real connections to others. It is the fires of presence that help reconnect us to Reality, to ourselves, and to others.

Living life from the heart is not easy. Living lives rooted in love is far more difficult than it sounds. If it were easy, we wouldn’t have all these spiritual traditions and practices meant to help us to do it. The Beatles played an important role both in challenging us to get serious about being present and about love and community and some of the challenges we are up against in being about these realities.

Barbara Deming was an activist who dedicated her life to social change and was a leader in the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the women’s movement, and the emerg-

ing LGBT movement. She paid a high price for that commitment, suffering through much of her life from terrible headaches, caused by the many beatings she had received during the civil rights movement. So I was struck when this hard-core champion of racial justice, feminist, lesbian activist concluded the introduction to her book Running Away from Myself: a Dream Portrait of America, drawn from the Films of the 40's, which was published in 1969, with reflections on The Beatles.

The Beatles introduce a note all of their own--and one that represents the most decisive break with an older generation. They are rebel figures whose rebellion has in fact been accomplished. They are who they are and stand in no awe of those who would frustrate them--the Blue Meanies, as they characterize such opposition in "The Yellow Submarine". Of the chief of those, one of the Beatles remarked lightly, "He reminds me of my old English teacher."...The Beatles clearly represent liberation from the cynicism that is so general. The landscape in which they move is a threatening one still, inhabited by "monsters" and by "lonely people." But their lives are felt to be charmed lives. They cannot be lonely; they have one another. It is not exactly that they know yet where they are...But ...they confront and oppose in their persons--in fairy tale fashion, simplistically, but with a great deal of wit--precisely the spirit of nihilism, the spirit of the Meanies ("I only take 'No' for an answer"). The Beatles remark of these Meanies, "They look almost human." "Join us", they are innocent enough to suggest. This rebellion against despair has been contagious already. May the contagion spread!

Clearly Deming's words were overly optimistic about what lay ahead. While the Beatles could envision a new world forged in love on the fantasy level of "Yellow Submarine", they could not find their way to that place in reality. Perhaps they, we, were not ready. Indeed, the burden of that hope might have even contributed to their demise, just as Bob Dylan found it impossible to carry the burden of such expectations. But the hope remains that another generation will take up the challenge of how we can take the kind of love of life that the Beatles expressed so well, and let it transform our lives and our world.

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

***Note:** Our great great thanks to **Guerin Wilkinson, Paul Bairly, and Sam Clark** who, in the course of this service, not only played the songs listed here, but also played "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite", "In My life", "The Word", "Let it Be", "My Sweet Lord", "Here Comes the Sun", and "Eight Days a Week".*