

PLAYLIST

▶ Gospel on the Radio

U2

JUNE 30 | 9:30 AM

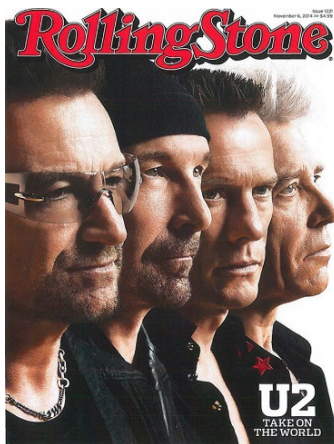
Sunday, June 30, 2024

Playlist: Gospel on the Radio – U2

“The Real Battle” | Luke 4:16-21 | Charlie Berthoud

“They are from Ireland.... They’re like religious freaks, I think. But it’s a great song, isn’t it?”

This is how a music critic was first introduced to the Irish rock band U2, way back in the 1980s.



The band formed in 1976 and put out their first album in 1980, with some religion and some good music. They’ve been going strong ever since.

U2 consists of four musicians: bassist Adam Clayton, guitarist The Edge, drummer Larry Mullen Jr, and lead singer Bono.

Three of the four members claim Christian faith, and their music is filled with religious references. Many sermons have been inspired by U2 and there is even an entire worship service with liturgy from their music, and the service is called **U2charist**.

So it’s a bit overwhelming to think about a sermon on the spirituality of U2. To prevent me from talking for hours, I’d like to focus **three messages** I believe I have heard in the music of U2, which loosely correspond to my three favorite albums of theirs.

When someone says “The Lord spoke to me....” I pay attention, with a fair amount of skepticism. That said, I believe, over the years, that God has spoken to me in the music of Irish rock band U2, with these three messages.

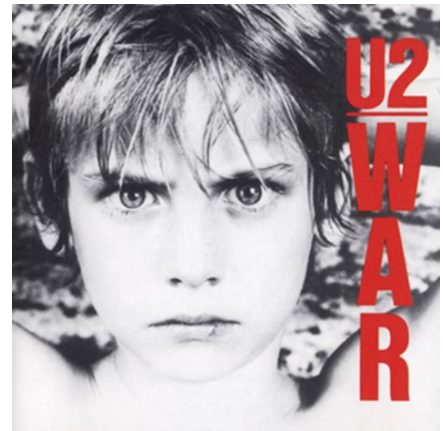
The first message is a **call to action**.

Early in their career, three of the four band members were part of a Christian community that didn't think highly of rock and roll or getting involved in politics. The first couple of U2 albums reflected a lot of personal piety, with songs like "Gloria."

But as the band matured and started seeing more of the problems of the world—the Catholic and Protestant fighting in Ireland, hunger, poverty, and warfare—their music evolved.

Their third album "War" which was the band's first foray into social issues. One reviewer said this album "turned pacifism into a crusade."

The best known song on the album is "Sunday Bloody Sunday." The words "Bloody Sunday" refers to incidents in Irish history, but the song isn't specific to any time or place.



The song has a militaristic drumbeat and lines about the suffering of the world. Bono paints a grim picture:

Broken bottles under children's feet
Bodies strewn across a dead end street

Bono sings about the futility and pain of war:

And the battle's just begun
There's many lost, but tell me who has won?
The trenches dug within our hearts
And mothers, children, brothers, sisters torn apart

When singing this song at concerts, Bono would typically march around with a white flag—symbolic of peace and unity.

If you didn't get a chance to listen to the song, I hope you will, on our Youtube playlist. The version there is a live concert at Red Rocks, in Colorado.

Then with intriguing irony, in the concluding lines of the song about peace and unity, we hear a call to join the fight:

And today the millions cry, we eat and drink while tomorrow they die
The real battle yet begun, to claim the victory Jesus won

Bono seems to be calling us shake off indifference and to join the fight, or “the real battle” fighting against social sins like hunger, poverty, and warfare, and personal sins like greed, lust, selfishness, and indifference.

The apostle Paul reminds us that living the Christian life can be a struggle. “Fight the good fight of the faith.” --1 Timothy 6:12

When I internalized U2’s recognition that hunger and poverty and war were sins that we need to battle against, this helped me connect the dots of my emerging Christian faith. I had spent a lot of time with Christian groups that were very focused on individual piety—Bible reading, prayer time, personal morality. Theologically Christian faith often felt individualistic and futuristic to me. The gospel message I heard too often was “Accept Jesus as your personal savior, so you’ll go to heaven; the world is not your home.”

To me that made Christianity feel very selfish, kind of like jumping in a rescue boat while ignoring the drowning people around me.

As I learned more about poverty and violence and injustice in Latin America, I learned how many elites in the church were implicitly and sometimes explicitly tell poor people: “endure your suffering, you’ll get your reward in heaven.”

Those messages stood in contrast to what I read in the gospel.

- Jesus seemed very concerned with loving neighbors
- He taught us pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”
- He fed hungry people, and in the face of a hungry crowd Jesus told his disciples: “You give them something to eat”

Among many places we see Jesus’ concern for poor and forgotten people is in the beginning of Luke, where Jesus starts his ministry, with what seems like his personal mission statement, reading from the prophet Isaiah. The political and religious leaders were not expecting such a teaching. Listen for God’s word from Luke 4.

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

So, Jesus begins his ministry with this statement of radical solidarity for people who are poor, suffering, and outcast. His message was not well received, as you’ll see if you keep reading Luke 4. They tried to run him out of town.

So, I’m glad we here at Covenant have joined the Matthew 25 movement of the Presbyterian Church, to engage with institutional racism, structural poverty, as well as congregational vitality.

U2 helped me grow into a more healthy and balanced understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. In their music, I hear that my Christian commitment requires me to be working on the problems of the world and the problems in me. Following Jesus is the good news of forgiveness, salvation, and new life AS WELL AS the call to love neighbors, and work for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Christian faith is individual and social, personal and public. Not one or the other. And U2 helped me understand that living a faithful life was a struggle, a battle, so I was fascinated with this image of the “battle” to claim the victory that Jesus won—the victory of justice and righteousness, the victory of faith, hope, and love, the victory over sin and death.

That’s why my first sermon, from my college bacalaureate service in June 1986, was called “The Real Battle,” inspired by this song and with this same scripture reading. I mentioned this in our weekly CONNECTIONS email, where you can read a copy of my sermonic masterpiece (haha).

Being a faithful Christian is a daily struggle, a battle to do the right things—individually

and collectively. We get encouragement for the battle in the words of the apostle Paul:

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all. (Galatians 6:9-10)

One message I've heard from God in the music of U2 is that Christianity is a call to action. Another message is that we are **surrounded by love**.

I heard this message particularly on U2's album "**Rattle and Hum**" which includes "When Love Comes to Town"—the song we used for our prayer of confession and sharing the good news today.

It's a great song, featuring Bono singing with blues legend BB King. The chorus affirms:

When love comes to town,
I'm gonna catch that train

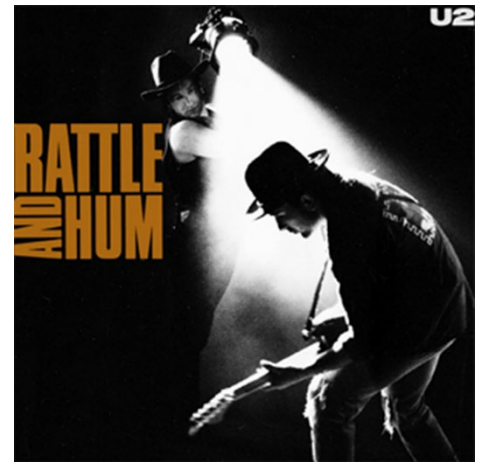
Those words could be interpreted a wide variety of ways, like many song lyrics. Good songwriting, like good poetry, is meant to get us thinking and making connections—in the same way that Jesus did.

There is a wonderful definition of parables that I've shared before, which seems appropriate here, to remind us that understanding the Bible takes some work.

"A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from everyday life, the meaning of which is sufficiently in doubt to tease the mind into active thought." (CH Dodd)

Music can be the same, with evocative words that make us ponder.

For me, "when love comes to town" is about the incarnation of Jesus, about God's love being here with us. "I'm gonna catch that train" feels like an invitation follow Jesus, to love neighbors, to work for the sake of the Kingdom.



Another favorite song on “Rattle and Hum” is “Love Rescue Me,” a poignant and bitter plea, which feels like a psalm and a prayer.

Bono wrote this song with help from Bob Dylan, and there is a sense of brokenness and sadness in the words and tune, with the prayerful refrain “Love rescue me.”

The last verse gives a vision of hope:

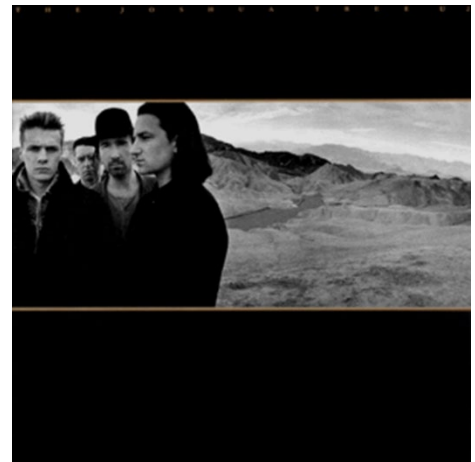
I’ve conquered my past
The future is here at last
I stand at the entrance to a new world I can see
The ruins to the right of me
Will soon have lost sight of me
Love rescue me.

I hear that love as God’s saving love, giving new and abundant and eternal life. It’s a beautiful song. (It was hard to keep it off the YouTube channel playlist!)

So, the messages I hear from God in the music of U2 include

- Call to action
- Surrounded by love
- On the journey together

Among other things, “The Joshua Tree” album is about U2’s is a reflection on sticking together and continuing forward in faith.



One of the best-known songs from that album is “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” To some religious people acknowledging that we as Christians are still searching is blasphemy, but I hear it as a song of faith and perseverance (and struggling in “the battle”).

The apostle Paul says,

- For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13)
- Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.
- Jesus said “Seek first the Kingdom of God”

We are pilgrims on a journey, and we have to help each other. Sometimes we get hurt, and sometimes we lose our way.

The “Joshua Tree” album reflects the bands love/hate relationship with the United States. They love the country for freedom and opportunity and beauty and hate when the country doesn’t live up to its own ideals. It feels like one friend trying to help another who has done foolish things, to lovingly and honestly hold another accountable, to stick together and learn from each other, and when necessary, say hard things to each other.

Two songs on this album were influenced by Bono’s experiences in Latin America, and it feels like he’s trying to speak the truth in love to the United States, a country he loves.

The haunting “Mothers of the Disappeared” was inspired by the mothers whose children had vanished and were presumed dead throughout the region. Bono saw this firsthand in El Salvador where thousands were abducted, tortured, and often murdered by the military in El Salvador, at a time when the USA was given millions of dollars to the Salvadoran government in what was called the fight against communism.

“Bullet the Blue Sky” is a loud and angry song also inspired by Bono’s travels in Latin America, where he saw the brutality and horror of US-supported military dictatorships. This was very personal for me in the 1980s, as I traveled through Central America and lived in Nicaragua and saw firsthand the devastating impact of US foreign policy in the region.

This is when I learned about accompaniment, being with people. I was working with Witness for Peace, a group with origins in Christian community, who was asked to come to Nicaragua to stand in solidarity with people who were being attacked by the US funded *contras*.

In these songs and others, I hear of Jesus' concern for people who are poor and suffering and too often ignored. I'm grateful to U2 for helping me and others remain engaged with complicated issues in the world and to have the courage to ask questions and challenge the status quo.

I want to close by sharing a story about one of their best-known songs, Pride (In the Name of Love), which is actually on "The Unforgettable Fire" album—another great listen.

Bono has been strongly influenced by Martin Luther King Jr, and this song is essentially about him.

While they were touring in the mid-80s, the US was debating whether to make a national holiday for Martin Luther King. There was a lot of resistance from Arizona, and as the band was preparing for shows there, they received death threats. One threat was very specific, promising to "blow Bono's head off" if they play Pride (in the Name of Love).

The band took note but decided to play the song anyway. Bono remembers:

"I just closed my eyes and I sang...trying to concentrate and forget about this ugliness and just keep close to the beauty that's suggested in the song. I looked up, and the end of that verse, and Adam was standing in front me. It was one of those moments where you know what it means to be in a band."

Adam is bassist in the band, the quietest member, the one who is usually in the back, off to the side. And here he is front and center, risking his life for the sake of Bono and the song and the message of love in Martin Luther King.

This story reminds me that we are **called into action**, to make this world a better place, to work for the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. Maybe it means taking a risk for racial justice, or going to a protest, or talking with a loved one about what PRIDE really means to you or getting involved in elections to save our democracy.

And the story reminds me that we are **surrounded by love**, the love of God which we experience through other people. We see that when people shield us from harm, or sit with us when we're sad, or weep with us when we're weeping. We see this love when we're broken and hurting and our throats are dry, and we're surrounded by people who are singing and praying and sharing the peace of Christ with us.

And this story reminds me that we're **on the journey together**, fighting the good fight, helping each other along the way. Sometimes that means the quietest member of the band steps up to the front with courage, sometimes that means the shy person does a brave thing, sometimes that means any one of us could be inspired to live with courage and love.

Let us pray.

Thank you, God, for gift of music, the way it touches our souls and inspires and challenges and comforts us. Help us to be ever more aware of the way you speak to us in music. Give us strength for the battle of daily living, for the battle against the sins all around us and within us. Amen.