

Let's start with a question this morning: what is the best concert you have ever been to? This is a no judgment zone, so all musical tastes are welcome at God's table. (*Wait*) I grew up in a deeply musical household. If it wasn't my dad's classic rock, it was my mom have 104.3 on the radio, all oldies, all the time. I remember my dad built his own custom CD racks to hold his massive music collection, which has only continued to grow and so there is little doubt that I grew up with a very comfortable acquaintance with concert going.

My very first was a request by my five year old self. I *adored* The Beach Boys and so when they came to our local county fair, obviously we all went, me with my little 80's side ponytail in tow. I fell asleep during Barbara Ann. My first solid memory of a concert was George Thoroughgood and the Destroyers live at Promenade Park in Toledo. I was on my dad's shoulders perpetually annoying him that I kept covering his eyes up with his new "Get a haircut and get a real job" t-shirt that I was wearing despite it being about 10 sizes too big. If you want a story about my mother and her luck, both good and bad with concerts, ask me about Davy Jones live at Epcot and Paul Anka, not so live in Maryland. If you want a story about Jennifer's big sister instincts having to be on full alert, while also challenging her germophobe tendencies, ask me about Sammy Hagar and the

gum that ended up in my hair. I have been rained out of the Backstreet Boys and rained on at Fall Out Boy all at Hersheypark Stadium. I drove a solid seven hours to see Idina Menzel in Columbus, willing to go into enemy territory for the sake of a good show. There is nothing like a live concert experience and more often than not, it has more to do with the crowd than anything else going on on stage.

Without fail, there is also a moment, it doesn't matter what the music is—Def Leppard, Pat Benatar, Justin Timberlake, Kenny Rogers (yes I've seen them all, Kenny Rogers *and* The Oak Ridge Boys, Lord help me, another Monroe County Fair classic)—there is always that moment that makes me stop. It makes me stop because the crowd is just comes together. It's almost surreal, when you realize that you and thousands of other people that you don't know, will never know, are sharing this one moment in time. All of your voices are raised together in song, no one caring if they can sing or not. All of your hands swaying in the air. It's almost as if the world stops, because in that moment, there's no angst, no one is wondering what the political affiliation of the person next to them is, no one is judging anyone unless they're impeding your view. It's just perfect synchronicity, and it is always my favorite moment. It happened when Pink sang "Perfect," when Dave Matthews starts the intro to "Warehouse," when John

Mellencamp went into “Jack & Diane.” In those moments, I feel like I fully and completely get what Jesus is talking about when he tells the disciples that he prays that they will be one.

The countdown clock before Jesus’ arrest is ticking very quickly down at this point. The remnants of the Last Supper have been cleared away, the towels from the footwashing are set aside to dry, and now Jesus is nearing the end of all of the things he wants to make sure that he tells the disciples before he won’t have a chance to talk to them. In these final moments, Jesus takes a step back from teaching and gives them one last gift, he prays for them. He lets them know the things which he wishes most ardently for them, and at the heart of that prayer is one thing: unity.

After three years together, Jesus knows the ins and outs of the relationships between these 12 men, well 11 now that Judas has exited the building. He knows that Peter and John have a tendency to bump heads over who is in charge, who knows the most. He knows that Andrew will generally follow where his brother leads. He knows that Thomas will be outspoken. He knows who will be quiet, who will get frustrated when they’re tired, who is the most organized, who struggles when things get difficult. And so he knows that once he is no longer with them, things are going to get immensely difficult, because they have to figure things out for

themselves now. *And* they have to figure things out for themselves now while still living in and amongst the world that is about to kill Jesus. This isn't exactly a simple task that he is laying out there for them.

Yet...what he prays and hopes for them isn't exactly the easiest thing either. Imagine sitting there and Jesus prays, "God let them be one as you and I are one." I mean, talk about a challenge. Well boys, you have to keep telling people about my life, about my ministry, in the Roman Empire, around the people and authorities who are about to arrest and kill me, *and* I need you all to be as tight as God and I. That's a pretty intense prayer. Imagine the looks around this table, like umm, how are we supposed to be that close? How are we supposed to keep things that together? How are we supposed to be *in* the world, but not *a part* of the world? How in the world are we supposed to any of this?

And it all circles back to Jesus' original answer—together. The only way you're going to be able to do this is by staying together. By remaining as one. The future that lies ahead of them is not one that is going to be manageable if they are perpetually letting petty squabbles get in the way. They aren't going to be able to keep Jesus' message going if they aren't all on the same page and know what they're about. In that moment they have to realize that so much of the little things that they have allowed to get to them

over the last three years have to be let go. The world is hard enough, without making things difficult amongst themselves.

But let's be real, humans are humans, and we are always going to make things difficult amongst ourselves, because that is what we are engrained to do. I mean, I think we would all say that as a congregation we're united, right? Like we're all here together, we all say the same things, sing the same hymns, we all generally like each other, so aren't we fulfilling Jesus' prayer here? But unity—Jesus' type of unity here—isn't just generically being like oh yeah we like each other. Unity like this is that transcendent concert moment where everything else fades away and that one thing seems to draw all people together. It is that moment where nothing else matters besides the thing that you share. This is not how humanity operates. We will function together, but ask us to be united together, and we will race to find all of the things that divide us. We are more interested in letting the world tell us what dividing lines we should draw between us rather than telling the world that we would rather stand together in our faith because that's the thing that guides us in all things.

As a society, as a *church* we could come up with a laundry list of items that divide us, many of which we would say is the hill that we will die on: Donald Trump, Joe Biden, climate change, Israel and Palestine, Trans

rights, LGBTQIA+ representation, Black Lives Matter, CNN/MSNBC/Fox News, social media, how much or how little we even talk about these things, when our committee meetings should be and how much they report, what the bulletin looks like, what time church is at, how long church is, what kids these days wear or how they talk. The list could go on and on and on, and yet we all sit here, proclaiming that we are united around the cross, around the cross upon which hung the Savior of the world who said he was dying for *all* of us, for forgiveness of sins and radical inclusion of all of God's people. So, it begs the question—where, truly, does our heart lie? Does our heart lie with all the other things we fight about or does our heart lie with our God who consistently and constantly breathes love and grace and hope and life into the world?

Because that's the thing that makes your head want to spin a little bit. We want people to know the church, to come to church, to feel it's important, yet, when people say that the church is full of hypocrisy we're offended rather than looking in the mirror and asking, where does my faith not meet up with how I operate in the world? How does my belief in God's unconditional love not translate into how I function with my siblings in the world? How can we expect people to want to come and be united with us when even within our own hearts we are divided. When we as individuals

can't even make up our minds about how our faith is going to inform our lives. This is why Jesus prays so fervently for the disciples, because he knows this is the world they're going out into...a world where it is going to be so much easier to bicker, fight, divide, and say you are in and you are out.

Think about those concerts you have been to, where it has been so easy to get caught up in the moment, in the fervor, where you are clapping and dancing and swaying your arms almost independently of conscious thought. Why can't we get caught up in our faith like that? Caught up with each other like that? Where the overwhelming power of God's love just gets us so intensely that we can't do anything other than make sure all of the world knows about it? Why is it so much easier to withhold that love from others? Why is it so much easier to give conditions and contexts for what people must do to get there? Jesus didn't give the disciples conditions beyond—love. Love one another and stick together. We make all of this so much harder than it needs to be. At the end of the day, we can't do this without each other, and it's going to be easier if we walk forward together united in God's love rather than finding all the reasons we should disagree. This place, this community should be like the ultimate concert experience, hearts united as one, ready and willing to be together for the sake of a world in deep, deep need of God's love. **AMEN!!!**

