

Cornel Barnett  
 Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
 Larkspur, California  
 February 16, 2014

Galatians 6:1-10; Matthew 4:12-17  
 "We Shall Overcome"

You might be surprised with the choice of "We Shall Overcome" as the anthem and sermon for our worship service today. The song has such strong political overtones, especially from a human and civil rights or union perspective, that one might feel it is out of place in a worship service.

One could not be further from the truth because the song began as a hymn. Stephanie tells me it appears in the African American Heritage Hymnal, which I believe, is used at St Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City where Stephanie was a music director.

The song came to me during an online reading of Pete Seeger who recently died. Wikipedia stated, "Seeger was one of the folksingers most responsible for popularizing the spiritual 'We Shall Overcome' (also recorded by Joan Baez and many other singer-activists) that became the acknowledged anthem of the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement, soon after folk singer and activist Guy Carawan introduced it at the founding meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1960.

"Seeger stated it was he who changed the lyric from the traditional 'We will overcome' to the more singable 'We shall overcome'." I surfed to the Wiki page on the song "We Shall Overcome" and a fascinating world opened for me.

I discovered there that the song originated over a hundred years ago as "I'll Overcome Someday," a hymn or gospel composition by Methodist Episcopal Church pastor, the Rev. Charles Albert Tindley of Philadelphia, that appeared together with seven other songs in a hymnal published in 1901. The published text bore the epigraph, "Ye shall overcome if ye faint not", derived from Galatians 6:9: "And let us not be weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."

The song read:

*The world is one great battlefield  
 With forces all arrayed.  
 If in my heart I do not yield,  
 I'll overcome some day.*

Tindley's importance was primarily as a lyricist and poet whose words spoke directly to the feelings of his audiences, many of whom had been freed from slavery only thirty-six years before he first published his songs, and who were often impoverished, illiterate, and newly arrived in the North. "Even today," wrote musicologist Horace Boyer in 1983, "ministers quote his texts in the midst of their sermons as if they were poems, as indeed they are."

The authorship of the song is complicated. Recent evidence strongly suggests that the actual source was a gospel hymn entitled "If My Jesus Wills", composed during the early 1930s, published in 1942 and copyrighted in 1954 by an African American Baptist choir director named Louise Shropshire.

The book, *We Shall Overcome: Sacred Song on the Devil's Tongue*, written by Isaias Gamboa, reveals evidence of Shropshire's authorship. In addition, the book reveals Shropshire's role as a close friend, civil rights ally and spiritual confidant of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Shropshire's lyrics are, "I'll Overcome, I'll Overcome, I'll Overcome Someday. If My Jesus Wills, I Do Believe, I'll Overcome Someday."

Guy Carawan wrote in 2010 "the old words were ... I'll Overcome someday, I'll be all right / I'll wear the cross, I'll Wear the Crown / I'll be like him, I'll Sing My Song Someday".

I think I have made the point that "We Shall Overcome" is a Christian hymn at heart and there it derives its power. Christian fundamentalists, civil rights groups, union movements and social justice movements around the world including South Africans during the apartheid era, all sang and sing the song.

I shall now turn to my own encounter with the song and thereby communicate more of the gospel's good news.

I was in a civil rights protest march when I served a church in Jacksonville, Florida, 25 years ago. I was friends with an African-American City Council member, a woman, who boycotted a budget vote in the council meeting because the budget discriminated against her district. Local law required all council members to be present for the vote. In protest, she visited the bathroom instead. The council ordered that she be brought forcibly by police to the chamber. Officers entered the bathroom, handcuffed her, and walked her into the chamber for the vote.

You can imagine what happened next. The African American community was in uproar. They called for march from the Abyssinian Baptist Church to City Hall. I joined the march. At the end, they formed a circle and sang "We Shall Overcome."

I sang wholeheartedly and thought theologically that we had overcome in Christ. I would have liked to sing, "We have overcome" along with "We shall overcome" because there was power for me in that Jesus had established the realm of God as our Gospel text today affirms today and that he conquered sin in his death and resurrection. I knew that we had a way to go to bring about a world of peace and loving justice. The Lord's Prayer states, "Thy kingdom come," which calls disciples (us) to continue to work and struggle for God's realm to come, and therefore, "We shall overcome" was appropriate as well.

Theologians call this the "already, but not yet" dimension of our faith. The fancy word is "parousia." I've only seen one display of "We have overcome" in the US. On January 20, 2009, after the inauguration of Barack Obama as 44th U.S. President, a man holding the banner, "We Have Overcome" was seen near the Capitol, a day after hundreds of people posed with the sign on Martin Luther King, Jr. day.

It is important as Christians for us to affirm the ways we have overcome and what we need to do to overcome. The fact that we can walk into this church, feel the genuine love of this community and the desire, and will of everyone here to be God's loving and compassionate people is testimony to the realm of God in our midst.

Nevertheless, as long as there are hostilities, abuses and wars out there we have a way to go. War is a complicated matter and that is why theologians and ethicists have created the "just war theory" which recognizes while war is very terrible, it is not always the worst option. There may be responsibilities so important, atrocities that can be prevented or outcomes so undesirable they justify war.

However, the theory is not intended to justify wars but to prevent them, by showing that going to war except in certain limited circumstances is wrong, and thus motivate states to find other ways of resolving conflicts.

Two criteria in a just war are "just cause" and "right intention."

"Just cause" states that force may be used only to correct a grave, public harm, such as defending against unjust aggression or intervening to stop massive violation of basic human rights of whole populations (such as genocide).

"Right intention" states that war must be waged for the sake of a just cause, not out of ethnic hatred, for revenge, for wanton killing and destruction, for material gain, nor to grab power. War's ultimate goal must be reconciliation and the restoration of justice. In addition, those who undertake war, even for a justifiable cause, should act not with arrogance or self-righteousness, but with humility, regret, and full recognition of the humanity of their adversaries.

It behoves us to go online or to the library to read articles on just war, pacifism and non-violence and decide for ourselves the best way forward. I believe God does not desire war of any kind but that is a perfect world and we do not live in a perfect world.

We have overcome in that we made great strides in governance (call it democracy), environmental and animal care, in research (on Friday the San Francisco Chronicle printed a fascinating UC Berkeley study about DNA that supports good, long term marriages). We have made advances in technology, science and everything, and we have a ways to go in every endeavour. We know the litany and we shall overcome.

The good news in all this is that we have overcome and we shall indeed overcome with Jesus in our lives. Please join me: ♪ Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome someday. ♪ Amen.