

David Schilling

Preached Sunday, May 18, 2025 - The Old Meeting House

Accompanying Playlist:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3GazDke96HDYdZT2SsMdmn?si=d28e05af040c4f15>

John 13:31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Many of us are now familiar with some of the messages Bruce Springsteen spoke during his concert in Manchester this week, describing the current state of human rights in this country. I quoted a little bit of it in this week's email newsletter, and here's another.

Speaking before he starts playing House of a Thousand Guitars, Springsteen tells the crowd *"The last check on power, after the checks and balances of government have failed, are the people, you and me. It's in the union of people around a common set of values. Now that's all that stands between democracy and authoritarianism. So at the end of the day, all we've really got is each other."*

Another way to say

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

When I put the quote in the newsletter, I had no intention of preaching about Bruce Springsteen this week, but I got curious, started listening, and it all seemed so clear. After making that statement, he goes on to play a song written in 2020 that is political in nature, but save for one very targeted line that you can look up on your own time¹, it's not a screed against the American presidential administration of both that time and again this time.

It's an affirmation of our societal values, unity and sense of purpose.

It's dedicated to community and connection through art.

From his musician's soul, it redefines the kingdom of God as a house of a thousand guitars.

*We'll go where the music never ends
From the stadiums to the small town bars
We'll light up the house of a thousand guitars*

To be fair, Springsteen borrowed and built upon the title theme.

Singer-songwriter Willie Nile first used the concept of a house of a thousand guitars in his 2009 song of the same title, dreaming of a musician's paradise where Jimi Hendrix plays all night long, joined by

¹ Since more than a few asked, and it's good...*"The criminal clown has stolen the throne, he steals what he can never own."*

Robert Johnson (specifically at midnight), also Bob Dylan, Muddy Waters, Hank Williams, John Lee Hooker and a few others along the way.

*Nile tells us "They say there are no broken strings in the house of a thousand guitars. Just some busted hearts and bee that stings
There are stained glass windows on the bedroom walls
You can hear the cry when salvation calls"*

Is it such a stretch to see our first reading today brilliantly reflected in both songs?

*And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.
And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
"See, the home of God is among mortals.
God will dwell with them;
they will be God's peoples
and God will be with them and be their God
...mourning and crying and pain will be no more.*

All good souls from near and far
Will meet in the house of a thousand guitars

It's not just Springsteen and Nile's house of a thousand guitars.

It's Harry McClintock's Big Rock Candy Mountain, a fanciful depression-era paradise for America's road-weary marginalized, exhausted

from their ugly reality of exploitative, low-wage transient labor opportunities.

*A land that's fair and bright
Where the handouts grow on bushes,
And you sleep out every night
Where the boxcars all are empty And the sun shines every day.*

It's Johnny Cash's beautiful imagery of pipers, trumpets, kettledrums, and 100 million angels singing, "when the Man comes around".

It turns out there are countless examples of musicians providing us imagery of just what their version of that new Jerusalem might look like.

Even the choice of the house metaphor itself carries some divine context, with Springsteen listing the gospel standard "Working on a Building" as his inspiration. In several interviews, he's described being fascinated and called to the notion of visualizing one's life as a building—an act of long-term, painstaking construction.

And while all of this was a really cool musical find on a Saturday afternoon, so cool that I felt the need to email all of you my playlist, there's a larger message. Springsteen reminds us of our communal bond with each other, right before launching into a visualization of the kingdom of God.

The organizers of the lectionary did the same thing, pairing Revelation with John. We envision our house, and then Jesus... and Kathie's message from CVRAN today point us in the direction of what to fill that building up with.

We fill it up with love.

Much like Bruce Springsteen's songwriting, Jesus's message is iterative. He describes loving one another as a new commandment, yet loving our neighbor shows up as clear as day in the Hebrew bible, *You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself*, Leviticus 19, ostensibly written about 1400 years before his birth.

If this is a repeat of a core teaching of Jesus' Jewish faith, where's the new commandment?

Saint Cyril of Alexandria argued, in the year 443, that it was a difference in degree. *"The law of Moses", he wrote, "mandated the necessity of loving our brothers as ourselves, yet our lord Jesus the Christ loved us far more than he loved himself. Otherwise, he would have never descended to our humiliation from his original exaltation in the form of God and on an equality with God the Father, nor would he have undergone for our sakes the exceptional bitterness of his death in the flesh. It was indeed something new, writes St. Cyril, for love to go as far as that."*

Or, to look at it through the lens of the house metaphor, it's the difference between simply looking out for our neighbors in their own house, and bringing them into ours as equals, co-creating a new building together more representative of that new Jerusalem, that more perfect Kingdom.

Putting ourselves in the struggle, linking our successes and failures, loving fearlessly, against whatever odds there might be.

I'm workin' on a building' for my lord, for my lord...
...that'll band us together for as long as there's stars
In the house of a thousand guitars.

Today, we heard just how following that teaching is unfolding here in Central Vermont. We heard about our neighbors building an inclusive local community in Central Vermont. Settling those escaping war and terror. We heard how this mission started with 5 families and grew. We heard about wraparound services that bring families fully into our community, enabling not just survival but thriving and inclusive participation.

We heard about supporting people through check ins that are supposed to be supportive but are now terrifying.

These folks aren't doing this work because of economic studies showing a benefit to Vermont's Gross Domestic Product, nor cultural studies showing how our own children will benefit from our interactions...Those are just mutually beneficial side effects.

This work is being done because it's the right thing to do.

This work is being done because when our neighbors...our siblings...are facing unimaginable terror, what else can we do but step in, absorb and block the fear they face to the best of our ability, form that union of people around a common set of values, that union of people that forms the last line of defense between freedom and terror...democracy and authoritarianism.

After all, we'd pray for the same for ourselves, wouldn't we?

So today, commit to building your house with room for your neighbors to join in, aspiring to create something even more magnificent together.

Let our collective fear and suffering be turned into strength and unity.

Build so that we are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Or... wake and shake off your troubles my friend

We'll go where the music never ends.

Brother and sister wherever you are

We'll rise together till we find the spark

That'll light up the house of a thousand guitars.

(Play song, starting at 4:04).