

Sermon – August 9
B. Nicol
“For What It’s Worth”

Stephen Stills purposefully began this song with a warning bell - Just two notes sound out a warning – what is happening here?

What is happening now?

Our nation has a long history of protest. From the Boston Tea Party to this summer’s Black Lives Matter marches, Americans have protested against slavery, war and drafts – even the Civil War draft. We’ve protested for rights for women, LGBTQ people, Blacks, and immigrants. Protested unsafe working conditions, worker’s wages, nuclear weapons, gun violence, and climate and environmental dangers.

In light of recent protests, Music Director Scott Stevenson created our Summer Music series: *Songs of Protest*. For the next four weeks our worship will connect 4 protest songs with scripture and what’s going on today: *For What it’s Worth* by Buffalo Springfield, Marvin Gaye’s *What’s Goin’ On*, Crosby, Stills, and Nash’s *Ohio*, and *Change is Gonna Come* by Sam Cooke.

The band, Buffalo Springfield, was named for the road steamroller company¹, and debuted at the Troubadour in April, 1966. It pioneered that California country-rock sound you may know from the Byrd’s, Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, America, Jackson Browne, Linda Ronstadt, and the Eagles.² Its members would go on to form Crosby, Stills, and Nash; Loggins and Messina; and Poco.

For What It’s Worth – better known by its subtitle, *Stop, Hey, What’s that Sound*, was written by Stephen Stills. When he played it for their managers, he just said, “here’s a song - for what it’s worth,” because it didn’t have a name - the label added the subtitle.³

According to *Rolling Stone*, *For what it’s worth*, is one of pop’s most-covered protest songs.⁴ Often associated with the Vietnam War, it’s been used in films like *Forrest Gump*, and in commercials. But, *For What it’s Worth* is mostly about 1960s curfew riots in Los Angeles.

The 1960s were the first time we really had a separate youth culture – different from their parents: different music, different hair and clothes, cruising in their cars – out on the streets. Scores of teens were attracted to LA’s Sunset Strip teen dance clubs, and all those teens and their cars worried nearby upscale business owners. A 10 p.m. curfew was instituted, and over the summer of 1966, hundreds of teens were arrested, some just for walking back to their car after leaving a club.

¹ Domenic Priore, *Riot on Sunset Strip – Rock ‘n’ Roll’s Last Stand in Hollywood*, Jawbone Press, 2007.

² John Einarson with Richie Furay, *There’s Something Happening Here: The Story of Buffalo Springfield: For What It’s Worth*, New York: Cooper Square Press, 1997, p. 92.

³ Ibid, p. 127.

⁴ David Browne, ‘For What It’s Worth’: Inside Buffalo Springfield’s Classic Protest Song, *Rolling Stone*, November 11, 2016.

On November 12, at least one, and maybe up to three thousand teens showed up - to sit cross legged in the street and peacefully protest the curfew laws. Flyers and radio promoted the event as a funeral for Pandora's Box club, which was closing. Protestors were young – some 14 and 15 – and carried signs saying, “we’re your children, don’t destroy us, and ban the Billy club.”⁵ Hollywood stars like Jack Nicholson, and Peter Fonda were there, too.⁶

Stills came upon the protest on his way someplace else. He described it like this: “A bunch of kids got together on a street corner and said we aren’t moving. About three busloads of Los Angeles police showed up, who looked very much like storm troopers. ... and I just went, 'Whoa! Why are they doing this?' There was no reason for it.⁷ And I looked at it and said, ‘America is in great danger.’⁸ The LAPD up against a bunch of kids. They just needed someplace to meet and talk - wanted equal rights as human beings.”⁹

The riot inspired Stills, and he wrote *For What its Worth* in about 15 minutes.¹⁰ You might be surprised to know that several songs were written about the event: the Standell's *Riot on Sunset Strip*, *S.O.S* by Terry Randall, *Scene of the Crime* by Sounds Unreal, *Safe in My Garden* by the Mamas and Papas, and Frank Zappa's *Plastic People*.¹¹

A promised meeting with the mayor never happened, and all but two of the teen clubs shut down. A year later they razed Pandora's Box. And the rest is history – both of our readings today teach us to learn from history.

Our first reading is from Romans - Throughout centuries, Romans has been a “catalyst for reform and renewal.”¹² From Augustine to Martin Luther to Calvin, John Wesley and Karl Barth, and now to us – we can always learn something new from Romans.

The book is Paul's longest letter and most complete theology, written in 57 CE in anticipation of his first visit to Rome.¹³ Jewish Christians had been expelled from Rome in 49 CE by emperor Claudius because their preaching about Jesus had caused disturbances, and when they were able to return several years later, under a different emperor, they experienced conflicts with the Gentile Christians who never left.

The preceding chapters of Romans give instructions for living in the middle of that unrest in the community, with the main message to “love your neighbor as yourself.” (13:9)

⁵ Priore, loc 6769.

⁶ Steve Lopez, “Column: 50 years ago, the sunset Strip riots made L.A. the ‘magical’ epicenter of a revolution,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 16, 2016.

⁷ Neil Young, *Long May You Run: The Illustrated History*, loc. 476.

⁸ David Browne, “‘For What It’s Worth’: Inside Buffalo Springfield’s Class Protest Song: How 1966 Sunset Strip curfew riots inspired Stephen Stills’ still-resonant anthem of Sixties malaise,” *Rolling Stone*, November 11, 2016.

⁹ Priore, loc. 6769.

¹⁰ Danny Hajek, “A Thousand People in the Street: ‘For What It’s Worth’ Captured Youth in Revolt,” NPR.org/Anthem, February 20, 2019.

¹¹ Steve Lopez.

¹² Beverly Roberts Gaventa and David Petersen, eds, *New Interpreter's Bible One Volume Commentary*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2010, p. 768.

¹³ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003, p. 2007.

Paul's message says we need to get along.

We need to get along.

We are to build up our neighbors and live in harmony with one another. Using images of the strong and weak, Paul asserts that agape means the strong have responsibility for others. We are to act for the good of our neighbors, with Jesus as our model and scripture our instruction.

The word here translated as “put up with” doesn't just mean tolerating or accepting those in need, but has more of a sense of carrying them – supporting or assisting them.¹⁴ Paul also has a word of caution. Familiar with the Roman world, uses battle categories in *his* subtle warning - we may not always be on the winning side - may not be those standing, but those who fall – calling us to do some reflective self-assessment.

Our reading from first Corinthians echoes this - it says to have caution – we may think our opinions, our “side” is in the right – but generally there is truth on both sides. How does Stills say it – “nobody's right if everybody's wrong...” And so often, when we work against other people it just magnifies problems. Protests erupt when voices aren't being heard, people aren't being understood, and nothing is being done to change the societal institutions and patterns that are causing the pain and harm.

History tells us that protests usually bring about some change, some improvements, but not always enough. After the 1965 Watts riots, economic efforts were made, but underfunded –apparently Congress was “more willing to support the Vietnam War effort.”¹⁵ Today, still, some parts of Los Angeles have still not recovered.¹⁶ The 1964 protest riots in Harlem led to President Johnson's Economic Opportunity Act as well as funding for early childhood education, nutrition, and afterschool programs.¹⁷ Many would say those really did lots of good, but not enough.

Not enough to really make a lasting difference.

Recent Black Lives Matter protests after the death of George Floyd are evidence that there has not been enough change. We are all called to listen to our brothers and sisters and understand. And, when we have an opportunity, to act for the good, by learning and changing our attitudes, beliefs and practices, so that racial, social, and economic inequality become a thing of the past.

That warning bell is still sounding....

Let us pray for change, in the words of Malcolm Muggeridge:

Lord, make me a channel of your peace,
that where there is hatred I may bring love;
where there is wrong, I may bring the spirit of forgiveness,
where there is discord, I may bring harmony;
where there is error, I may bring truth;

¹⁴ New Interpreter's One Volume Commentary, p. 784.

¹⁵ Peniel E. Joseph, “How Will Protests End? History Says Depends on Government Response,” *National Geographic*, June 12, 2020.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

where there is doubt, I may bring faith;
where there is despair, I may bring hope;
where there are shadows, I may bring light;
where there is sadness, I may bring joy.¹⁸

Amen

Benediction – as we go forth, receive this blessing

Grant, O Lord, that what has been said with our lips we may believe in our hearts,
and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives,

In the name of the Father, son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

¹⁸ Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, *A Guide to Prayer*, Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1983,
reprinted with permission from Malcom Muggeridge: *Something Beautiful for God*, 1971.