

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 21, 2010      Fifth Sunday in Lent

Psalm 73: 23-28

Romans 8

Choir Cantata

## Loving Jesus

Go with me back to the 1600's Europe.

First there was a German love song: *Flora, meine Freude, Meiner Seele Weide* (found in a songbook, Henrich Alberti's *Arien*, in 1641).

Here are the words:

Flora, my joy, my soul pasture  
All my peace  
What makes me enchanted  
Bestricken and the spirit  
Flora, it's you  
Thy pomp glitters day and night  
My eye and heart between comfort and pain.

Quite a love song!

And that is the song which inspired Johann Franck to write the words for the hymn we know as *Jesus, Priceless Treasure – Jesu, meine Freude* in the German.

Imagine the deep longing our love song composer had for Flora. This is where Franck's love for Jesus begins!

Franck (wrote the words) was born in Germany in 1618. His father died when he was just 2 and he went to live with an Uncle who saw to his education. He went to the University to study law at age 20, where his religious spirit, his love of nature, and his interest in poetry helped keep him out of trouble.

He returned home after only two years at the university at his mother's urgent request.

You see, 1618, the year he was born, was also the year the Thirty Years War began which was one of the most destructive conflicts in the history of Europe and was fought primarily in what is now Germany. The armies were expected to be largely self-funded from loot taken or extorted from local towns, which encouraged a form of lawlessness that often imposed severe hardship on the people who lived in the occupied towns.

And so it's quite understandable that Johann's mother wanted him near her in those times of war when their village frequently suffered from the presence of troops. It is probably during these years that he wrote these words.

While his secular poetry is quite mediocre and obscure now, many of his 110 religious poems/songs live on as hymns. *Jesu, meine Freude* is the most well-known and sung in Christian churches of every tradition today.

But he only wrote the words. The man who wrote the tune that we sing also lived in Germany in the 1600's near where Franck lived. He is also named Johann, Johann Crüger and was 20 years old than Franck.

Crüger studied theology at several schools in Germany and settled in Berlin in 1615. He also studied music and was quite gifted; he was appointed cantor and organist of St. Nikolai Church in Berlin, for 40 years.

Crüger himself did not write any words to hymns, but he was one of the most distinguished tune composers of his time. And in 1644 he published a hymnal which included the tune and words which are still sung together today as *Jesus, Priceless Treasure*.

But what the choir will sing in a moment was written (the music that is) another composer, Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707).

He was born in 1637 and had a distinguished career as a composer and organist in Germany. In 1668 he became the organist in Lübeck where he remained for nearly 40 years. In this position he had considerable latitude and autonomy which allowed him to compose prolifically. At the end of his career/life he was visited by several (now) famous composers: Georg Frideric Handel, Georg Philipp Telemann.

And in 1705, J.S. Bach traveled 200 miles on foot to meet Buxtehude and hear him play. Bach then studied with him for several months in, before Buxtehude died in 1707. Both Handel and Bach wanted to have his job as organist St. Mary's, but neither one wanted to marry his daughter which was a condition for the position.

While most of the composers at that time were writing choral music because their jobs as organists required it, Buxtehude wrote largely because he was inspired. For him, composing was not part of his job, but rather it was an expression of his heart and his faith. He used the scriptures as well as church hymns and sacred poetry for his texts and wrote a variety of styles of music for them.

He was influenced by Italian composers which were a good fit with his passionate faith. He also had the rare gift of being able to transform a modest piece into a work of great art. The inherent poetry of words inspired him and ignited his imagination. His music is filled with warmth and strength using simple devices like word-repetitions or a significant pause.

So, a few things about the words to this piece the choir will sing – and the hymn which we will sing at the end of worship.

It is basically a love song to Jesus. Johann Franck pours his heart out; the first line sets the tone: Jesus, priceless treasure, or joy and treasure or Jesus all my gladness. I don't know about you, but this is not how I typically speak about Jesus – even in my most private prayers.

I reserve my gushing affection for my family usually. And when it comes to our faith, we seem more comfortable with defining our love in terms of obedience and character. But our love for God and Jesus ought to also contain affection. It is far too easy to make the Christian life about

growing in knowledge and performance rather than growing in affection for and adoration and worship of our precious Lord Jesus.

The words are written from the believer's point of view and praise the gifts of Jesus Christ as well as longing for his comforting spirit. It is very personal – in the “first person” – and using possessive pronouns all over the place – me, mine –

Jesus is beside ME

Jesus will never fail ME

It also has many stark contrasts between images of heaven and hell, often within a single section. Remember that the first 30 years of Franck's life were the Thirty Years War, being fought on his front doorstep – not across the ocean. So when he writes:

Let the foe surround me, him I do defy

Satan's hosts may press me, powers of ill distress me

He knows what he's talking about!

Hell fires flash, their thunders crash

Again – the sounds of war and destruction. He knows misery, famine, plague.

And yet he has no fear, no resignation.... He has joy! And the only place we can find joy in the midst of suffering is in Jesus.

In v. 3: Rage ye, World, wild leaping! I stand here, and singing

Calm, in peace, at rest.

Notice the structure of the whole piece. The first and last verses focus on Jesus and our affection, devotion and faith in him. And the 4 verses in between are about what threatens us – the forces and circumstances that bring us down and try to separate us from God:

Enemies, death, greed, the ways of the world, temptation, fear....

But all of those things are held between the joy of loving Jesus. We begin and we end with loving Jesus. Because Jesus is our treasure, our gladness, our friend, we will find peace in the storms of life.

May this arrangement and the chorus written in response to the original lyrics help us keep our love for Jesus warm as we express to Him how worthy He is of all of our affection!