

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, November 2

Every Monday or Tuesday, I contact first-time guests at Sunday's worship service. I extend my personal welcome, tell them I hope they were warmly received, and invite them to return.

Yesterday, I received a response from a guest who had returned for a second Sunday:

David,

Thank you for reaching out. There were a few people who introduced themselves and thanked us for visiting. My daughter and I did attend Sunday and enjoyed the service. The special musical guest was amazing, and as my daughter put it, "it made me happy".

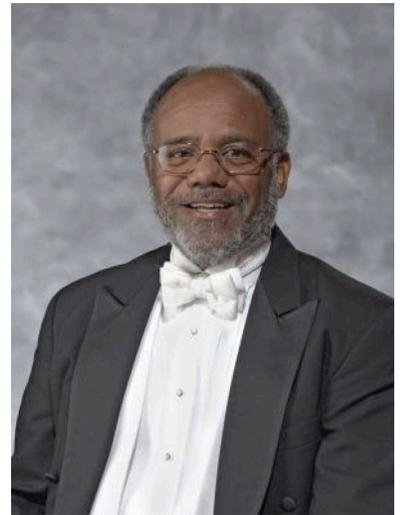
The special music guest was Michael Preacely. Michael sang "It Is Well With My Soul" as a solo and "He Never Failed Me Yet" with the choir during the offering.

What an offering it was! To echo our guest's daughter: "It made me happy." The music made me so happy, in fact, I had to clap my hands. Come the second verse, I had to stand up.

Many of you who were present know what I mean. The ministry of music offered by Michael and our choir made you happy, too.

Robert Ray is the composer of "He Never Failed Me Yet." I first became acquainted with his work 20 years ago in North Carolina when our choir sang Ray's *Gospel Mass*, which set the words from the Catholic Mass to the rhythm and harmony of African-American music. It was a toe-tappin', hand-clappin' delight to sing. I became acquainted with other Ray pieces after that, including "He Never Failed Me Yet."

Space prohibited our printing the lyrics of the anthem in the bulletin. I've included them below as well as a link to a video in which the piece is sung by a University of Virginia choral ensemble. (Truth be told, I prefer Sunday's performance by Michael and our choir!)



Robert Ray

I will sing of God's mercy
Every day, every hour
He gives me power.

I will sing and give thanks to Thee
For all the dangers, toils and snares
That He has brought me out.

He is my God and I'll serve Him
No matter what the test
Trust and never doubt

Jesus will surely bring you out
He never failed me yet.

Solo: I know God is able to deliver
In times of storm
And I know that He'll keep you safe
From all earthly harm.
One day when my weary soul is at rest
I'm going home to be forever blessed

Chorus

Solo: Didn't my God deliver Moses from King Pharaoh?
And didn't He cool the fiery furnace
For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego?
When I think of what my God can do
He delivered Daniel
I know He will deliver you.

Chorus

http://www.gospelsonglyrics.org/songs/he_never_failed_me_yet.html

In 1987, the General Assembly was in Louisville. On the Sunday of the Assembly, Jennie and I drove to Cane Ridge for a special worship service. We then drove back into Paris with friends for the 11 a.m. worship service at Seventh Street Christian Church, the historic African-American congregation.

When we arrived, an elder from the congregation greeted us. He told us their pastor had been summoned out-of-town earlier that morning by a family emergency. Our presence, he said, was clearly providential. Four visiting pastors had walked in the door unannounced. We would lead worship. One of us would open the service. Another would offer the prayer. A third would serve at the communion table. A fourth would preach. Before I could say a word, my three friends volunteered for the opening, prayer, and communion. The elder looked at me and said, "Thank for preaching this morning."

I don't remember what I said. What I do remember is the spirited call and response of worship, the choir's clapping and swaying to the gospel anthem that preceded my sermon, the verbal *Amens* that peppered my preaching, and the joy of worship among those gracious folks. "It made me happy."

A week later, I received a handwritten letter from the elder asking me if I would consider becoming their pastor. Having been at my St. Louis congregation for only two years, I respectfully declined, but I was honored beyond words to have even been asked. I kept the letter.

Sunday's service reminded me of that day nearly 30 years ago. I found the letter in my prayer journal from 1987 and reread it.

It made me happy.

David Shirey