

"Grace and Truth"

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Confession

time. Once, years ago, when I was a college student home for a break, my mother, who taught piano for most of her life, declared that she would bestow upon her son a 10-dollar bill if he would only sit down at the piano in the den and pound out a hymn, any hymn at all.

I was poor and not an idiot. I opened the old red *Psalter* to number 50, "Grace and Truth Shall Mark the Way," a rendition of Psalm 25 in a setting that never wandered far from its opening chord. Piece of cake. Inside of a half hour, I'd made ten bucks and probably smirked once she handed over the loot.

I'm

probably a couple of decades older than she was back then, but today I think I understand more of why she made such an silly offer. Sure, there was all those years of piano lessons I'd had, years that dissipated far faster than lakeshore fog once I walked away from the bench. And, yes, there probably was some faint hope that if I'd sit there again I'd come back to that bench more often. I was her only boy, for heaven's sake, and my hair was too long, and what she heard out of my bedroom back then was the Beatles. Ten bucks was a pittance.

But there's this too--the music itself, not that "Grace and Truth" sat atop her *Psalter Hymnal* hall of fame. What her son played--not well--held her soul lovingly, almost as if she were a child, its child. What I played was, after all, a psalm; and my mother's people, for generations, had sung them, often only them. It wasn't just a hymn, it was a psalm. Sure, she was happy she stuck me there on the bench. Yes, I was being a *me* she might have loved seeing more of. But I think it was the music too, a psalm.

The Synod

of Dort, way back in the early 17th century, made it clear to Dutch Calvinist churches that, in worship, only psalms were permissible, just another measure of that miserable Calvinist penchant for being wary of beauty--after all, we're depraved, remember, and totally too, and never forget that. The only legal fare for congregational singing was God's own songs, the poems collected in the book of psalms.

Last

night, and this weekend, I listened to two lively musical experts, two men who love the psalms, explain the richness of the old texts and then put those psalms on musical display, not only adorned in their Genevan robes, but dressed up in a wardrobe of different styles and settings, some of them very contemporary; and it was--both last night and this weekend--great joy and pure blessing. Maybe, just maybe, those hard-core, 17th century Calvinists in their fashionable beaver hats at the Synod of Dort were on the money.

But then,

look what Geneva had to work with, look what a hundred-thousand song-writers still do. The psalms-r-us. They're holy writ, but, God be praised, they're human writ too. They open their arms to us, to our stories--to our pain and our joy, to our desolation and our unfettered praise. They are made of the very same stuff we are. They're God's book of poems, but they're ours too. What a combo.

This

morning's thanks are cheap praise, really, just my few words for musical literature that has opened itself to generations of believers, poems that welcome the human spirit, prayers that have taught gazillions of faithful just how to talk to, and with, God almighty.

"Grace and Truth Shall Mark the Way" at a little piano in the den. Ten bucks pay. I feel like Judas, and I'm sorry.

But this

morning I think I know more of what mother heard that day forty years ago; what she heard, despite the ingrate mercenary at the keys, was

"Grace and Truth" that's nothing less than Grace and Truth.

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