

“Sad songs say so much.” That’s what Elton John has believed, over the course of his long and successful musical career. “They reach into your room,” he sings. “Just feel their gentle touch.” We know what he’s talking about. But why do sad songs say so much?

An experimental philosopher named Joshua Knobe says that he once knew a rock musician whose songs were so very sad. He says to *The New York Times* that her music was packed with sorrow and “heart-rending things that made people feel terrible.” One song was even the basis of a YouTube video that focused on suicide. “That was the theme of her music,” he said, an approach that you might think would drag people down.

Oddly enough, the effect was the opposite. Her music had “tremendous value,” says Knobe. The surprising truth about sad music is that it makes us feel good. Knobe is now married to the musician who wrote those sad songs. He has found that experiencing someone’s sadness can help us feel more connected. “You’re feeling just alone, you feel isolated,” he says. “And then there’s this experience where you listen to some music, or you pick up a book, and you feel like you’re not so alone.”

Now, if you would like some suggestions for some sad songs to listen to, the magazine *Rolling Stone* did a poll of the saddest songs of all time. The top 10 include: “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry,” by Hank Williams. “Cat’s in the Hat,” by Harry Chapin. “Everybody Hurts,” by R.E.M. “Hurt,” by Nine Inch Nails “Tears in Heaven,” by Eric Clapton. All of these are sad and sorrowful songs. But they are songs that we *love* to hear.

Ok, so, what is going on inside us? None of us wants to be sad, but we do seem to enjoy art that makes us feel sad. And there are numerous theories about why this is true. “Maybe we experience a catharsis of negative emotions through music,” reports *The New York Times*. “Maybe there’s an evolutionary advantage in

it, or maybe we're socially conditioned to appreciate our own suffering. Maybe our bodies produce hormones in response to the fragmentary melancholy of the music, creating a feeling of consolation."

Either way, however you try to explain it, sad songs make us feel good. Perhaps that is why the Psalms found in the Old Testament are so raw and emotional. As a hymnbook for the people of Israel, many of them are upbeat songs of praise, but not all them. Some, like Psalm 25, are truly sorrowful, offered to God in the middle of a challenging and difficult time. In fact, our psalm for today asks for guidance and deliverance, speaks of enemies and people who are treacherous, reminds us of the sins of our youth, and it provides us with the very clear and concise point that we are all sinners.

So, yeah, you might say that Psalm 25 is a sad song. It is a song that, in the words of Elton John, says "so much." And the value of the psalm is that it is honest about the things that make us feel terrible. The song puts our trust in God who is merciful and loving, and who instructs sinners in the right way. It makes us feel good because it draws us closer to God and to each other, which is an especially good thing for us as we journey together with Christ to the cross during this season of Lent.

"To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul," it begins. "O my God, in you I trust; do not let me be put to shame; do not let my enemies exult over me." In the face of a serious threat from his enemies, the psalm-writer reaches out and asks God to "lift up my soul." In other words, in the midst of his sadness and despair the author is looking for a connection. And this focus on connection is significant, because it has a number of layers to it.

It also raises questions for us when we too, like the Psalmist, are experiencing feelings of sorrow, grief or despair. For example: To who or what are

we connecting to? A higher power? Our past selves? Our future selves? The people around us? And, most importantly, how do these connections help us?

Psalms 25 begins by connecting us to a higher power. “Make me to know your ways, O LORD. . . . Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old.”

In this sad song, the LORD is “the God of my salvation,” the One who has the power to save and rescue us from our enemies, our troubles, our illnesses. The God of salvation provides us with victory over danger, defeat, or distress. This higher power is also the One who shows us mercy and “steadfast love,” a love that is called *hesed* in the original Hebrew.

Hesed is a word that communicates a love that is much more than a romantic or sentimental feeling. It is often translated as mercy, kindness, lovingkindness or steadfast love. But there is also an eagerness and intention to *hesed* that reveals that God has decided, has made it his decision to show us mercy, kindness, and love. So, whenever we sing today’s Psalm, or open our Bibles to it for some comfort, we are connecting to the God of our salvation, the God of mercy and steadfast love. And I’m sure we can all agree that it is a song that is bound to make us feel good.

This morning’s psalm also connects us with our past selves. “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!” And those are wonderful words for us to hear during Lent as we contemplate our sins and the ways that we have failed God and others. They offer us an authentic insight into our souls, which makes sense because the sad songs that usually move us the most are those that are the most authentic. They speak honestly about the sins of our youth and our transgressions. And there are dozens of “sorry songs” that we all know well: Blake Shelton’s “I’m Sorry.” “Please Forgive Me,” by Bryan Adams.

Chicago's "Hard to Say I'm Sorry." And the somewhat ambiguous, "Sorry Not Sorry," by Demi Lovato. So, is she sorry ... or not?

When we connect with our past selves through Psalm 25, we are asking for a forgiveness that only God can offer. We are confessing to our merciful and grace filled God, we are confessing to the One who has chosen to show us mercy and kindness and love. And as we do so our sadness over sin is replaced by the joy of having the burden of our guilt removed.

Currently I have been teaching the Confirmation students about Confession and Forgiveness. I recently pointed out to them that in the early church it was a common thing for a congregation to confess their sins on Ash Wednesday, but they would not hear an absolution from the Pastor until Easter Sunday. Perhaps you noticed that the liturgy in the service this past Wednesday did something similar. Thankfully, though, we don't have to wait 40 days to receive forgiveness because this morning after we offered our sins before God we heard the comforting words that through Christ our burden of guilt has been absolved.

Psalm 25 also connects us to our future selves. "Good and upright is the LORD," says the psalm; "therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way." In other words, when we sing this song to God, we are asking to be given a new direction for our lives. We want God to show us "the way" and lead us in "what is right." And after having discovered that our past choices have resulted in sadness, we want guidance toward joy and satisfaction.

The Good News we find in the Gospels, is that our future with God involves moving in a new direction, walking in the way of Jesus Christ. It is no accident that the community of the first followers of Jesus was called "the Way." This was "a way of life that stood in glaring contrast to the world," according to a Christian author named Shane Claiborne. In "this kingdom everything is backwards and

upside-down — the last are first and the first are last, the poor are blessed and the mighty are cast from their thrones.” The way of God through Christ offers our future selves a path to new life.

And last, but certainly not least, today’s psalm connects us to the people around us. “All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.” The Christian faith, as all of us are aware, is not an individualistic experience but takes place in a community of people who keep God’s “covenant and his decrees.” A covenant is a promise-based relationship, in which we promise to be faithful to God, and God promises to be faithful to us. It goes all the way back to God’s covenant with Abraham, one in which God promised that Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky.

As Christians, we are covenant people. As Christians, we are always connected to God and to one another. These connections help us by binding us together in the body of Christ. The “body does not consist of one member but of many,” says the apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. And it is such an important arrangement because each of us has different gifts and abilities. Every member is valuable, and every talent is needed for the body to do Christ’s work in the world.

We especially need these connections as challenges come our way. As Paul says, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” Whether we are experiencing bad times or good times, we need each other. Psalm 25 connects us to God, to our past selves, to our future selves, and to the people around us. It strengthens our bonds with each other, in the ups and the downs of life. And it points us to the covenant community known as the body of Christ. In fact, you might say that no other sad song could make us feel so good. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.

