

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

October 25, 2020

II Stewardship, Matthew 22:34-46

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of *your* Love. *Amen.*

Stephin Merritt and Claudia Gonson spent the summer of 1983 sitting on “The Wall,” the red brick relief behind the Harvard Square subway station. Merritt, a graduate of The Cambridge School of Weston, met Gonson, a Concord Academy graduate, during their high-school years.ⁱ The pair first bonded over Gonson’s *David Bowie Songbook* for the piano, beginning a four-decade musical partnership, most notably in the band, The Magnetic Fields.

In *Strange Powers*, a 2010 documentary about Merritt and the group, Gonson recalls of that summer: “We would sit there on ‘The Wall’ with many punk rockers of varying types of mohawk length ... kids whose names were like, ‘Toby Skinhead,’ and ‘Phlegm.’ Complete freedom, total vagrancy – it was awesome.”ⁱⁱ

Despite these fond roots, The Magnetic Fields’ music does not neatly fit a punk’s jambox, and neither does Merritt’s unconventional, often sardonic verse rest easy in effete prep school classrooms. The band’s primary live instruments include piano, ukulele, cello, and banjo, and their studio albums incorporate unusual noisemakers (kitchen whisks and frog-callers, among others) and long-unfashionable electronica sounds.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, sometimes, their quirk, cleverness, and brilliance, *click*. For my ear and heart, this happens most often in their musically sparest and lyrically simplest efforts, and my favorite of their catalogue borrows on that most common of song titles: “The Book of Love.” In a deep, unemotive baritone, Merritt imagines what sort of tome that compendium would be.^{iv} He sings:

*The book of love is long and boring
[And] No one can lift the ... thing
It’s full of charts,
and facts and figures,
and instructions for dancing.*

*But I,
I love you it when you read to me.
And, you,
you can read me
anything.^v*

As Merritt sings love, so Jesus preaches love: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments [depend] *all* the law and the prophets”^{vi}

Now realize that Jesus delivers this answer after the “chief priests and elders” of the temple challenged him in the appointment Sunday-before-last, asking Jesus, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”^{vii} *Just who do you think you are*, they interrogate him.

Jesus delivers this answer after the Pharisees attempted to “entrap him” in last week’s appointment about whether to pay the Emperor’s taxes, after they schemed for his civil arrest!^{viii}

And Jesus delivers this answer after, in this morning’s appointment, the religious leaders huddle behind his back and send an expert to “test” him.^{ix} Matthew uses the Greek verb rendered here “to test” only in these conflicts with the Pharisees and Satan, as in the devil’s wilderness temptations of Jesus.^x

So, *in the spirit of the devil himself*, these, the self-professed righteous, unrelentingly antagonize Jesus. From every angle and at every opportunity, they seek to discredit, embarrass, and shame him before others – yet Jesus shows them grace ... upon grace ... upon grace ... until he finds this foothold to center all his teachings – all *their* teachings! – **upon Love**: love of God, and love of neighbor.

Jesus responds *with* Love no matter what he has received or what he will endure in return.^{xi}

The second verse:

*The book of love has music in it
in fact that’s where music comes from
some of it is just transcendental
some of it is just really dumb.*

*But I,
I love you it when you sing to me.
And you,
you can sing me
anything.^{xii}*

Of his songwriting, Merritt observes: “In the Seventies, cinéma vérité influenced movies. [Films were] very ugly looking, because [they were] supposed to look ‘real’ ... which meant that [were created to look] like no one had set [them] up – [they] looked so ugly that no one would do that deliberately, but, of course, they did it just as deliberately as [they once set] beautiful, glamorous movies. So it was *fake* vérité.

“[See,] Filmmakers [had] decided that self-expression was showing the world as horrible as it really is, rather than as glamorous Marlene Deitrich can be, or as stylish as Rock Hudson and Doris Day movies can be ... That’s how I feel about other people’s records. I think they’re emphasizing convention over beauty ... And I’m usually emphasizing [beauty]^{xiii} over convention”^{xiv} ... *emphasizing beauty over convention*.

Though the documentary reveals moments of Merritt’s tenderness – when his dour countenance softens while engaging Gonson about a musical detail, or while blushing at his mother’s memories of his awkward adolescence – the film presents an artist who, interpersonally, struggles to get out of his own way. The Merritt of *Strange Powers* steers uncomfortable situations out of a ditch, only to drive them over a cliff. When he senses he outmatches someone – an interviewer or a passer-by who recognizes him – he can be cruel. He spends hours and hours at bars, but to isolate, rather than to congregate – to shut himself off from others and enter his own world, rather than enter a shared experience.^{xv}

This Merritt sings of love aspirationally, rather than confessionally. That is, when singing of love, he *chooses* beauty over convention. Refusing any “fake verité” – he *chooses* the promise of love, no matter what his experience or Top-40 radio evidences.

The final verse:

*The book of love is long and boring
and written very long ago.
It’s full flowers and heart-shaped boxes
and things we’re all too young to know.*

*But I,
I love you it when you give me things.
And you,
you ought to give me
wedding rings.*

In Merritt’s “Book of Love,” the first two verses reference imagined details of the volume, while each succeeding chorus intimately personalizes those details:^{xvi}

*The book of love is long and boring ...
but I love it when you read to me.*

*The book of love has music in it ...
and I love it when you sing to me.*

This final stanza-chorus couplet fulfills the earlier two. Merritt acknowledges the inscrutability of love: despite its manual's facts and figures, instructions for dancing and heart-shaped-box purchasing, we are all too young to understand it – it's not just Merritt; *all of us* struggle to comprehend, give, and receive love's mysteries. Even so, *read this love to me ... sing love to me ... give this love to me.*

See, were Jesus' summary of the Law a Twentieth-Century, atheistic art-pop song set to the ukulele, he might have responded to the Pharisees similarly:

Yes, the book is lengthy and boring, and written very long ago – it's got charts and archaic prescriptions, prohibitions and complicated recipes. Yet these books of life and law do not intend only to reflect the world as it is, but to inspire love. ... not mere conventions to be abided, but commitments to be chosen, loves to be dared.

So, if in your frustration for the world around you, you must come at me – seek to injure, entrap, and “test” me – then come:

*For I,
I want to read it to you.
I want to sing it to you.
I want to give it to you.*

This world as it might be: beautiful ... beloved.

In the name of God,
Amen.

ⁱ As Merritt explains in the documentary, he met Gonson while he was visiting her older sister, who also attended Cambridge School at Weston. Claudia Gonson is three years younger than Merritt.

ⁱⁱ *Strange Powers: Stephin Merritt and The Magnetic Fields*. Directed by Kerthy Fix and Gail O'Hara, Fix Films, 2010. While I transcribed the dialogue as accurately as I could, there may be inconsistencies between these quotations and a formal script.

ⁱⁱⁱ Early albums of The Magnetic Fields remind me most of *Architecture & Morality*-era OMD. Their recordings since the turn of the millennium and after the breakthrough, critical success of *69 Songs*, do not lose their tether to that electronica, though the sound tends to lean more toward the distortion of late Joy Division and early Jesus and Mary Chain. For those bands, though, the rough edges were real – they were not especially skilled musicians. Merritt, on the other hand, is a savant, and so more carefully and deliberately creates the “fuzz.”

^{iv} In the liner-notes accompanying the 3-CD box set of *69 Love Songs*, Merritt offers: “I like taking cliches literally and unpacking them, or whatever you call it. Any book that was comprehensive about love would be really long and unliftable, like *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, and boring as a read ... [It] would have dance instructions for archaic dances. And how to buy heart-shaped boxes full of chocolates. Handkerchief identifications. How to behave in the presence of the parents of your loved one in Vienna at the turn of the century – in the turn of each century.”

^v Merritt, Stephin, “The Book of Love.” *69 Love Songs*, Merge Records, 1999. The second line of the song is “No one can lift the damn thing.” Though I value the playful dismissal that “damn” effectively captures, I clipped it from the sermon, so as not to create a distraction by the cursing. [I really like this live performance](#) of the song with Merritt solo on a ukulele.

^{vi} Matthew 22:27-30.

^{vii} Matthew 21:23.

^{viii} Matthew 22:15-22.

^{ix} Mathew 22:34.

^x Boring, M. Eugene. “Matthew.” *The New Interpreters Bible*, edited by Keck, et al. Abingdon Press, Nashville. 199, pp. 424-425.

^{xi} Committed to his principles and values, Jesus “does not give other people permission to determine how is going to behave. M.L. would approve.

^{xii} Merritt, “The Book of Love.”

^{xiii} In this bit of dialogue, Merritt speaks to emphasizing “beauty or interest.” Because I abbreviated the clause in the penultimate sentence quoted, I abbreviated it as “[beauty]” in the final sentence, as well.

^{xiv} *Strange Powers*.

^{xv} In the song “Papa Was A Rodeo,” Merritt hints of this dislocation – in the bar, but alone: “The light reflecting off the mirror ball/looks like a thousand swirling eyes/They make me think I shouldn’t be here at all.”

^{xvi} In the liner notes, Merritt’s interviewer – *Lemony Snicket* author, Daniel Handler – observes similarly, “One of the things that I like about this song, that I think is present in all of your best writing, is you speak awhile on one thing in the abstract, and then you speak awhile on something personal, and without linking them explicitly, they seem connected. The verses are all about the book, the chorus is all about loving somebody.”