



The Grand Rapids Choir of Men and Boys will perform their Lenten Concert today and Friday at the Cathedral of St. Andrew in Grand Rapids. Submitted photo

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Words have power, and so, sometimes, does silence

Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*



"Miserere Mei, Deus:" Have mercy on me, O God.

Each year during the Christian season of Lent, the Grand Rapids Choir of Men & Boys presents a concert of readings and songs appropriate to the season. This week's concert at the Cathedral of St. Andrew today and Friday includes a favorite piece of mine, the "Miserere Mei, Deus" by Gregorio Allegri. The Miserere is based on the Latin text of Psalm 51 — which begins, "Have mercy on me, O God" — and was commissioned at the request of Pope Urban VII in the 1600s.

While it is often sung in Latin, in this year's concert it is sung in English translation. It reminds me of not only the personal need for mercy but also of our corporate need for mercy in our time. During times of conflict, fear, and even hatred, we need the prayer: "Make me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me."

Mercy is a theme shared by nearly all the world's religions. It is the recognition that we cannot, on our own, live up to what it means to be authentically human. It is the recognition that we do not always love our neighbor as ourselves, or love God with our whole heart, soul, strength and mind. It not only appears in the Psalm text shared by both Jewish and Christian scriptures, but is also reflected in the Qur'an, where nearly every chapter begins with "In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful."

As we look at our world and even our own country, mercy, graciousness, respect and love seem to be in short supply. We build walls around ourselves that prevent our seeing the humanity of others. Politics divide not only our country, but also families and friends. Captured by our individual echo chambers, we have lost the ability to understand, let alone love our neighbor. "Have mercy, O God."

Fear of the "other" because of their religion, skin color, what they wear, or how they pray, has led to discrimination and violence. Recent shootings at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh and two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, show us again the sin of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia. "Have mercy, O God."

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, in addressing the New Zealand Parliament concerning the mass shootings at the Al Noor mosque and the Linwood Islamic Center, demonstrated the kind of multicultural integrity that reflects the culture of that country.

Cynthia G. Lindner, University of Chicago Divinity School faculty member and director of ministry, described the prime minister in the e-publication "Sightings" as follows: "Ardern spoke in three languages during her address, moving between the Arabic of the Muslim community and the two 'official' languages of her country — the English of everyday commerce, and the Maori language of New Zealand's indigenous peoples. The prime minister evoked the values of her nation ... in that Maori dialect: aroha (love,

hospitality, mutual respect) and manaakitanga ('the power of the word,' reminding hosts to be expressive and fluent in welcoming guests)."

While Ardern's words were powerful, it also is important to note what she withheld and would not say. She described the 28-year-old killer as an Australian citizen who will be fully prosecuted and "will face the full force of the law in New Zealand. ... He sought many things from his act of terror, but one was notoriety. And that is why you will never hear me mention his name. He is a terrorist. He is a criminal. He is an extremist. But he will, when I speak, be nameless. And to others I implore you: Speak the names of those who were lost, rather than the name of the man who took them. He may have sought notoriety, but we in New Zealand will give him nothing. Not even his name."

Linder continues by describing "a media-saturated moment that suffers from a surfeit of 'free speech' — wherein 'free' has come to mean hapless, heedless, and regardless of harm — it is a cause for pause when we are asked, implored, not to speak something. Choosing not to say — that is, choosing silence — runs counter to our impulse, in such a fractured political landscape, to project our identities and claims, proclaiming who and what we stand for (and against). ... But Ardern is not asking us to keep silent out of fear, shame or marginalization; rather, she points out that by refusing to speak the name of Friday's attacker, we resist giving notoriety and prominence to evil's perpetrator. Silence, in this case, is not resignation or capitulation: Silence is freedom from coercion. ... Silence is power."

As noted, the Maori language term "manaakitanga" includes the "power of word," but sometimes we also need the "power of silence." In our religious traditions we know the power of words, but when words are used to disparage others, especially minorities and those whom we see as strangers, we need to know how to refrain from speaking.

As we face division in our own land — division which leads to hatred, and hatred which sometimes leads to violence — we need to remember the Psalm of repentance that cries out for mercy. We need to know when to remain silent and when to cry for mercy. "Miserere Mei, Deus:" Have mercy, O God.

interfaith@gvsu.edu

IF YOU GO

Grand Rapids Choir of Men and Boys Lenten Concert

When: 7:00 p.m. today and Friday

Where: Cathedral of St. Andrew, 215 Sheldon Blvd. SE, Grand Rapids