Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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Last year, on her "Harlequin" album, Lady Gaga belted out a song that was nearly a century old: "Forget your troubles, c'mon, get happy. You better chase all your cares

away. Sing 'hallelujah,' c'mon get happy. Get ready for the judgment day."

"Get Happy" goes back to 1930 when Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, channeling gospel music themes, wrote the tune for "Nine-Fifteen Revue" on Broadway. The revue was a flop, closing after only seven performances, but the song — oh, the song has lasted and lasted.

Twenty years later, Judy Garland claimed it as her own in an elegant, sexy and upbeat dance performance in the movie "Summer Stock." Ever after, she included the song in her concert performances, and no wonder: When the American Film Institute announced a list of the top 100 movie songs in the 20th century, "Get Happy" came in at 61.

"The sun is shining, come on, get happy. The Lord is waiting to take your hand. Sing 'hallelujah,' come on, get happy. We're going to the Promised Land."

It's a happy song, and a lot of people have performed it in recordings, including Nick Cave, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Rufus Wainwright, Sammy Davis Jr. and more than dozens of other singers.

Lady Gaga or Judy Garland may be singing "Get Happy," but, when I hear the song, I hear the Holy Spirit.

Just as hundreds of years ago the Spirit moved among the enslaved people, inspiring them in the creation of deeply painful and deeply hopeful African American spirituals, I have the sense that the Spirit is always moving and inspiring throughout history. This occurs especially among artists with their wide cultural impact on people, and that includes pop music songwriters.

Think of "Don't Worry, Be Happy" by Bobby McFerrin, or "Happy" by Pharrell Williams, or another gospel-animated song, "Oh, Happy Day" by Edwin Hawkins.

The Spirit moves songwriters and all other artists to grapple with the most profound questions of human life, and great works of art often deal with tragedy and pain and the bleakest parts of existence. But works of happiness also have their place.

This isn't to say that life can be happy all the time. Each of us experiences pain and grief, failure and depression. We all find ourselves, at times, in a desolate valley of

emotional anguish.

What the Spirit is saying through happy songs is that we have a choice of how to respond. We can embrace bitterness and turn in on ourselves. Or we can remain open to life and to eventual happiness.

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We live in a time when we're told to be frightened and encouraged to be bitter. And some holding power or seeking power use fear to stir up anger, who use anger to divide us, who promote an us-versus-them philosophy that's deeply unchristian.

Christianity is nothing if not countercultural. In a society that exalts the rich and mighty, we Christians are called to open our arms wide to include everyone on the margins: the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the innocent and the helpless. In a society that tells us to grab as much for ourselves as we can, everyone else be damned, we Christians are called to share what we have. That includes sharing ourselves by being open to others and by listening — really listening — to who they are and what they're experiencing.

In a world in which fear and bitterness is a political strategy, happiness is countercultural. As St. Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Or as Bobby McFerrin sings, "In every life, we have some trouble. When you worry, you make it double."

If we believe the Lord is near, if we believe Jesus is with us, if we believe the Holy Spirit is filling us with inspiration, how can we not be filled with joy? As Psalm 66 says, "Shout joyfully to God, all the earth." Or, as Pharrel Williams sings, "Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth."

The symbol of our faith is the crucifix, the instrument of execution, and yet Edwin Hawkins can celebrate the crucifixion: "When Jesus washed, when Jesus washed, he washed my sins away. Oh, happy day."

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Rejoicing goes deep in the Old Testament where, in Isaiah, God, through the metaphor of Jerusalem, is depicted as a doting mother: "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad because of her. … Oh, that you may suck fully of the milk of her comfort, that you may nurse with delight at her abundant breasts! … As nurslings, you shall be carried in her arms and fondled in her lap; as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you."

Or think of a similar metaphor in "God's Grandeur" by the great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

In following Jesus, we are called — sent out to the world — to be as fully human as we can, to live our lives so that we are fully alive, especially to each other.

And to be happy. We do that by following in Jesus' footsteps, and, in that way, we find the deepest joy possible. So, rejoice because God is our mother and our father and our brother and our inspiring brooding Spirit and because we — all of us — are a family, together, one body.

C'mon, get happy.