

## How do we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

2017 Laity Address

Steve Dry

“By the rivers of Babylon — there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” – Psalm 137:1-4

My name is Steve Dry, and I am the founder of Catalyst, a spiritual innovation hub. As part of my role, I have the pleasure of meeting regularly with inspiring entrepreneurs and innovators from all over Boston.

Today, I want to tell you about one of them: Jon Feinman. Jon is the founder and CEO of Innercity Weightlifting, an organization that trains formerly incarcerated men to be personal trainers. We met a few months ago at a panel discussion on racial injustice.

We later met for breakfast, where Jon described his path to founding Innercity Weightlifting.

Jon's story begins as an AmeriCorps member in East Boston, working and building relationships with gang-involved men. This was the sort of population that many in his life advised him to stay away from.

After this experience, Jon pursued another passion of his: weightlifting. He became a licensed personal trainer and built a lucrative business. However, as his business matured, something inside him called him back to those gang-involved men, something inside him called him to do something more.

This is usually the part of the story where we fast forward through the complicated stuff; this is where I tell you about how he melded his passion and skills to meet the community's need, how he created an organization that works to end cycles of incarceration and bridge social capital in one of the most racially divided cities in America.

This is where I'm supposed to tell you about their impressive statistics — and they are impressive: how they served 139 high risk young people in 2016; how 95% of the students who make it into the later stages of the program avoid reincarceration; how they've built social capital with over 373 clients. This is the story I'm supposed to tell.

But that's not the story I want to share with you today; it wasn't the story we focused on over breakfast that morning.

Instead, I want to share with you some of the struggles of creating Innercity Weightlifting the way Jon resisted the advice to avoid this underserved population – the challenging task of listening for the Lord's song in a foreign land.

The theme for this annual conference comes from Psalm 137. In it, we meet the exiled Israelites now living on the shores of a river in Babylon. They are deeply distressed because their city of Jerusalem has been pillaged and they are concerned with how to maintain their worship practices.

They have a deep tradition of worshipping in Jerusalem. For them, Jerusalem is a holy and sacred space where God is present. Babylon, in contrast, is profane. To sing the songs of Zion there would have been to desecrate them. And frankly, it would have been far too painful for them to bare. So instead, they hang up their harps and they weep.

Now, it's a pretty standard interpretation for us to empathize with the Israelites in the story: Babylonians are horrible people who exiled them and torment them by asking them to sing their songs.

It's pretty standard for us to read their refrain, “How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?” as a rhetorical question, as if they already know the answer is impossible.

And while its standard, it's also probable that this is exactly how the authors intended for you to read it; they were Israelites after all.

There are two problems with this interpretation of the text today: first, I think it calcifies the binary between sacred and profane, and second, it legitimizes a demonization of the other. First, the idea that the Israelites can only worship in Jerusalem does not allow us today to creatively think about the evolving form that we call church.

Somewhere in our history, we decided that worship services were the way to commune with God. We've built seminaries to train people to create worship, marketing schemes to get people to attend, and even metrics to evaluate it.

Like the Israelites, we've gotten really good at singing our song in Jerusalem. Yet, as pews are increasingly empty one in three people left the UMC between 2003 and 2013.

We're finding ourselves, like the Israelites, in an emergent exile. And if we choose to interpret this scripture in the traditional way, we may as well hang up our harps and join the Israelites in mourning right now.

Second, the anger of the Israelites leads them to demonize the Babylonians.

Don't get me wrong, the Israelites are experiencing understandable pain from the destruction of Jerusalem. We especially hear that anger in the later verses of this text, verses that are very difficult for many of us to wrap our heads around. However, this anger and fear cuts the Israelites off from actually hearing the Babylonians.

Today, segregation and division in our society makes us foreigners to one another. It tells white people like myself to fear people of color. That we ought to grab our bags tighter when a person of color approaches; that we ought to be vigilant when they enter our stores; that we must be wary of venturing beyond what is known. We are taught to see the Babylonians as the tormenters and the pillagers, without ever knowing them.

But Jon chose a different path. He chose to know them. And thankfully he did.

Jon and Innercity Weightlifting chose to work with the 400 most high-risk gang affiliated youth in Boston. He dreamed of using his relationships and his experience with personal training to change the lives of these youth. He dreamed of training them to become amazing athletes, of helping them get into college through athletic scholarships, of increasing their opportunity through bids to the Olympics.

And when he finally got his organization set up, his dream was a complete flop. His idea simply didn't resonate with the community he hoped to serve.

Forced to reconsider his assumptions, he began to listen. And in listening, a new world emerged. Jon learned that the people he served lacked a sense of hope. 100% of their students have been shot, shot at, or stabbed before the program – 90% indicate 'death, jail, or the streets' in their six-month outlook.

For Jon, listening shed a new light on this community and helped him pivot his organization towards their needs. Using Jon's experience as a theological lens, I'd like for us to consider for a second, a new interpretation of the Psalm.

This time, listening to the Babylonians before pre-judging their intentions. What might emerge that we haven't seen before?

"By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our harps. For there, our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'"

From this perspective, we become aware of new details in the text. The tormentors are asking for joy and for songs of Zion.

We can imagine that perhaps these Babylonians, like the men Jon works with, are actually deeply in need of hope and something more in their lives. While the Babylonians asking for songs may be associated with those who pillaged Jerusalem — they may in fact have pillaged Jerusalem themselves — they are authentically looking for something.

Maybe they couldn't come to Jerusalem to find it; maybe they're not really sure what they are looking for at all. If we are quicker to listen than to sing, then we can start to hear the needs of the community. We can start to hear the songs of Zion in a foreign land.

With a better understanding of his constituents, Jon imagined a new process for transforming their lives. Rather than starting with educating them on personal training, he began by building trust with the community. And that meant doing a lot more than just working out in a gym and waiting for people to show up. He visited inmates in jail and helped them with basic tasks after incarceration.

As Jon will tell you, trust-building often just meant showing up. And it wasn't until that trust was built outside the walls of the gym that his students actually stepped foot into the gym for the first time. In listening, Jon finally understood how best to address the needs of his community and add value to their lives.

It's at the rivers of Babylon, not the temple in Jerusalem, that the Israelites meet the Babylonians. I think the church can learn a lot from Jon's work of listening, building trust, and meeting the needs of the community. I've thought a lot about how we use 'service' to talk about 'worship.'

As Lance Bettencourt notes, "Services are solutions to customer needs. They are a means to an end, not an end in themselves."

You don't need a "taxi," you need to get somewhere quickly, efficiently, and cost-effectively. This was a lesson all too painfully learned by taxi drivers with the emergence of Uber. Yet, we often get into the business of latching onto an idea that seems to work and trying to make it better.

We use branding and user experience to improve how people relate to our service, rather than actually creating new ways of solving a customer's need. And I think that may be what happened with the church.

At some point, we decided that the way to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world was to create an hour-long mixture of a sermon, hymns, quiet meditation, and liturgy.

We said great, let's package it up and send it out. As churches grew and differences emerged, so did denominations. We started to brand our versions of the Good News into Methodist and Episcopal and Lutheran.

And then, when we wanted to address more particular preferences, we hopped on the user experience train and started having Taize services, Contemporary worship, and even dinner churches.

However, what taxis learned, and what we ought to learn too, is that people don't take a taxi for a good experience. They take a taxi to get from point A to point B.

At the end of the day, it's about achieving the customer's goal, not our own. Similarly, if our worship services are not achieving the goals of those attending—if we are too focused on what we 'do best' instead of what people need most—then we need to be open to reevaluating our methods.

In the mid-twentieth century, the church's worship had very practical purpose beyond just spiritual development. At a time without easy access to inspirational speeches, live music, learning and development opportunities, and community, the church offered all of these in the form of sermons, hymns, Sunday School, and community pot lucks.

But times are changing and technology has made many of these accessible to most people. TED Talks offer instantaneous inspiration; YouTube and Spotify offer music access; Blogs and podcasts offer opportunities for learning and personal growth; Facebook and LinkedIn cultivate online communities.

And with these changes, we've seen drastic shifts in the church: 98,000 fewer people attend worship in 2013 as compared to 2003. All the while, the rates of un-affiliation are growing.

At the same time, nonreligious religious groups seem to be gaining traction. Groups like SoulCycle and CrossFit offer transformation, accountability, and introspection to its participants in a way that resonates with their lives.

SoulCycle boasted over 10,000 rides per day in 2015.<sup>1</sup> There are 4 million CrossFitters around the world and 13,000 boxes.<sup>2</sup>

What if the combination of sermon, hymns, prayer, and liturgy, were not the only way – or even the primary way – that people find communion with God and one another?

What if there were different methods for introducing and sharing the love of God and the hope of Jesus Christ in the world?

Would we be woke enough to listen?

As Jon reevaluated his methods and focused on trust and hope first, he saw the emergence of a vibrant and beautiful community, far different but better than he imagined.

As students developed hope in the future, they also developed the skills to provide personal training to clients, many of whom came from different socioeconomic and racially diverse backgrounds.

The results of which were a community that transcended the traditionally segregated boundaries of Boston. Clients would cross the urban thresholds between neighborhoods to talk with trainers. They are changing the minds of many, and making the differences between Israelite and Babylonians more difficult to discern.

Now let me be clear: Innerscity Weightlifting is a completely secular organization; Jon never once mentioned spirituality in our conversation.

Yet, when I went onto their website to learn more, I came across this description of the organization: "Love becomes our weapon for change. The gym is where our students come to find hope to build trust with positive adults – and to belong to a new community that provides unconditional support."

Isn't this the bridge-building, relationship-fostering, institution-smashing kind of community that is the legacy of Jesus Christ?

The church is where our parishioners come to find hope to build trust with positive adults and to belong to a new community that provides unconditional support.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.racked.com/2015/7/30/9075191/soulcycle-ipo-revenue>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cnbc.com/2016/04/05/how-crossfit-rode-a-single-issue-to-world-fitness-domination.html>

As the church sits by the river in an emerging exile, as the walls of our churches – our Jerusalem, literally and figurative crumble before our eyes, there is hope in the work of Jon and Innercity Weightlifting, in listening for the Holy Spirit as she continues to make all things new. What we learn from his work and others is that our intentions cannot come first.

Like Jon, our listening has to happen outside the walls of Jerusalem; our solutions have to come out of real needs from the community, not the traditions we established in the church; and we need to be open to the possibilities that the spirit brings.

How do we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Let's start by listening.