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Summer of Soul Podcast.mp3

DATE

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DURATION

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START OF TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:00] Speaker1

The following is a message from WellSprings congregation. In case no one said it yet, I don't think I've heard it. Harry picked all the songs for this morning. They're all his favorites. I think that means they like your choices here. And Harry, don't wander too far during this message. We may not be done celebrating you, so you have to sit in the front. Just, you know. Don't go away. Boy. It's a little warm today, huh? I don't know which it's going to be, but by the time we get to Ken's party program, I will either have my hair up or I will not be wearing this jacket. So place your bets or both. Yeah, it could be both. Secret third option both. So I guess the end of June is goodbye season here at WellSprings. At least this year it is. A few weeks ago. If you were here or if you watched it online, you can still watch it. At our annual congregational meeting. I talked about the symbolic importance for us as a community. Of this big change that we will celebrate and honor later today and recognize. The change of Reverend Ken's retirement from ministry. I talked about it as a symbol of the turning of the page from one era of WellSprings to the next. And this morning in our service, we're also honoring the end of another area era, the era of Harry.

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Who sat in this spot. As our keyboard player since WellSprings very first service. That's right. Right Harry. Yeah. In January of 2007. 15 years. He's probably missed. What, Harry? Ten, 12 services in that time. Not that many. So we do have a few surprises for Harry to share a little bit later during my message. But amidst all these celebrations today, I do want to leave you with a bit of a word to help ground you and settle your heart. And maybe encourage you a bit this week. For how we might move into the next day and the next week and the next year in our own lives. Towards all of the changes, like Rodney said, not here just at WellSprings, but for us. You know, each summer we do this here at WellSprings, we have a tradition where we take inspiration for our messages in the summer, on Sunday mornings from movies or television. The stories that we spend our time, a lot of our nights and weekends watching in our day to day lives that we are taking in and being affected by one way or the other. And so we look to what spiritual wisdom might be found. Not just in traditional holy books, but also everyday. Through the work of artists and writers and creators of all kinds. I want you to know that in a few weeks I'll be preaching on The Handmaid's Tale for my message.

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Because sometimes art mirrors life in disturbing ways. And I think there will, unfortunately, be lessons that we can take and wisdom that we can take. From the work of Margaret Atwood. And then sometimes art mirrors life in encouraging ways. The kind of art that connects us to our hearts. The kind of art that helps us keep going. In the face of hard changes. And so I was inspired for this Sunday. For all the reasons of all the things going on in our community. To ground my message. In a documentary. A story about real people and real things that really happened. A beautiful documentary that does not pretend that everything is okay in the world. But that reminds us that we can still sing. It's an Oscar winning movie that came out last year, a local movie, the directorial debut of Ahmir Questlove Thompson, a Philly native drummer from The Roots. It's called Summer of Soul. That's the movie poster. If you haven't seen this movie, you may not recognize the significance of the footage it shares. The footage is recovered never before seen from the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival. It was a six week long music festival held in New York City. And the footage from the festival itself is interspersed. With present day interviews from people I think most, if not all of them black New Yorkers who attended that festival about 50 years ago.

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Reflecting and remembering back. Most of them were teenagers or kids even at the time. Some of them snuck away from home to attend without their parents permission. At least one woman in her interview said that she told her mother she was going to church when she left to attend the festival. For each of those six weekends. Maybe she was right in a way. The Harlem Cultural Festival took place in the same year, the same summer as the Woodstock Music and Art Festival in upstate New York. And I looked it up. Both festivals estimated that they saw somewhere between 300,000 and 400,000 attendees. They were about the same size. But I've heard of one. And I had not heard of the other before this movie. Of course, the practice of media companies then and in most of the years since. Has been to prioritize and share certain stories, the stories of white artists and white music and white culture. And so the footage of this Harlem festival so lovingly captured, beautifully captured. Sat on a shelf for 50 years. Never before seen or broadcast until Amir Thompson took on the project as a labor of love to tell the story. I think part of why this story resonated so well today with moviegoers and streaming audiences in this past year. Is that it's not just about the music.

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It weaves in all throughout these incredible performances. Stories of change. Stories about the deep rifts and tensions in our country in 1969. Some of you were alive then and remember 1969. It weaves in stories of loss and grief. The festival takes place just one year after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr. And there are moments of that festival that play out like a public memorial service, a beautiful ritual of mourning. And of course, there were stories of anger and fear. That might resonate with us today. In that historical footage. Festival attendees there that summer. They're interviewed about what it means to them to be there, to be there celebrating black culture and art. And their responses are joyful, but also naturally interwoven. With pain. Frustration at having to face at that time. So much violent backlash against the civil rights movement. The pain of needing to fight for basic rights. Rights that should be basic in this country in the first place at so high of a cost. The frustration is not so different. From how I feel today. How probably many of us do. As we watch progress from my lifetime, significant, beautiful progress meet frightening, violent backlash. I don't need to tell you what that looks like, but I will name it anyway. The rise of racism and white supremacy. The rise of transphobia, homophobia. And of course, the devastating life threatening rollback.

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Of reproductive freedom. That I and probably many of us are still processing, still reeling from this morning. We can relate all too well to these concert goers interviewed in 1969. On the heels of so much progress, they find themselves again scared about what follows. And yet the core of this film. At the end of the day, and the core of the festival itself is not found in political demonstrations or speeches. Politics and social change are the backdrop. But in this story, music is the centerpiece. In this story. Joy and tears. And dancing and moving in our bodies and coming together is the centerpiece. The music does not necessarily tell you the details. It doesn't lay out what was happening at that time. It doesn't lay out the history or the policy changes at all. That wouldn't be very good music, right? Just a list of policies. Of course not. The music expresses how it feels. The music helps us get in touch with how it feels to be alive in a time like that. It reminds me that while our stories and our histories as different people may naturally be different, we do all know what pain feels like. What grief and rage feels like. And what Hope feels like. The writer and spiritual memoirist Anne Lamott, has a line in her book *Traveling Mercies*, that I think some of you know.

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It says, How come you can hear a chord? And then another chord. And then your heart breaks open. How come you can hear a chord and then another chord, and then your heart breaks open? How come? Seriously. Do you have any songs that get you misty eyed every time you hear them? I do. We did one this morning. Holy. Now there's that line about the red wing bird. I can't sing it. That song, *The Mother* by Brandi Carlile. Do any of you have them at the top of your mind? The songs that bring tears to your eyes. What are they? How? Yeah. Okay. Common thread. But it's Adele, one of the adult songs. Life uncommon. Sound of silence. Music brings up specific memories that can bring up feelings. And yet a song is literally just a collection of sound waves organized in a particular way. Right? It's vibrating through the air into our ears. It's literally moving our ear hairs around in a particular pattern. And somehow that sends a signal to our brain that can make us feel proud. Or sad. Or juiced up and ready to go. Or held. What a miracle. It is the kind of miracle. For me that reminds me to be humble and to wonder, even when I am discouraged and despairing, what else might be possible in this world, if that is possible? The people who cultivate the skill, the people in this movie who are incredible lifetime talents, but all the people who cultivate the skill and the talent to make music.

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Our bards of the spirit. They are messengers who bring us something holy, who know how to communicate with our souls and bring us back to ourselves and to each other. Music can help us understand just a little bit of how it feels to have a whole different experience of life. To help us know through the lyrics, but even more importantly, to feel. A little bit more connected to this human experience. That we share. And then maybe to begin to understand what we need to change. In order to share this world with more justice and fairness. And honesty and compassion. The Unitarian clergyman who was minister of my home church where I became a Unitarian Universalist in Washington, D.C. All Souls Church, a Paul DAVIES. He was the minister in the 1940s and fifties. That's why you get this lovely old timey picture. He once spoke in a sermon about the power and meaning of music in church. And he said, When I worship, I must feel again the love I owe to others. I must not only hear about it. But feel it. In church. I do. And I am brought in every way toward my best. He's a good minister. So I don't know a more fitting way to honor both the spirit of this film.

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And the spirit of this day here with all the emotions that it carries, then by giving us a chance to feel again the love that we have for each other. That is cultivated in this place by all of the regular daily and weekly actions we take every week. Like Rodney said, the hundreds of times we've sat in these seats walked up those wonky stairs that everybody's talking about these days, arrived in Bell Hall to find the mike stands missing or somebody's soundsystem plug in not working. We must not only hear about it today, but feel it. Why don't you join me briefly for just a moment in the spirit of prayer. God of our own hearts understanding. Giver of this life and this moment. Giver of these people and this place. When there is so much in our hearts, may we remember that we don't have to keep it all inside. May we remember that? Sharing our tears and our song and our words and our presence with each other. It's what we were designed to do. When there's too much to hold. Don't hold it alone. Grateful this morning that we are together. I share these words out loud, and I also pray for all of the prayers that are held in each one of our hearts this morning. We say amen.

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