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# Sage Against the Machine

## *Sermon for the Memorial Service for The Rev. Dr. Gordon Straw*

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**A** reading from **Led Zeppelin** Four, Song Four, verse Four:

And it's whispered that soon, If we recall the tune...  
then **the piper** will lead us to reason.  
And a new day will dawn...  
for those who stand long.  
And the forests will echo with laughter.

That song is “Stairway to Heaven,” and it was blasting out of Gordon’s phone while he was in the ICU.

And, just in case you’re worried: no, I am not going to exegete “Stairway to Heaven” for this sermon—much as Gordy would have loved that, Amen?

No. I’m just throwing it in there to rock out a little bit, in Gordon’s memory.

“Stairway to Heaven” **was on heavy rotation in the ICU**, I can tell you.

When I first heard it coming out at full volume from his phone, I thought:

“Isn’t this a little **loud** to be playing while someone is in intensive care?”

Which was contradictory for me to think and feel, because it was one of the first things Gordy and I bonded over: our LP-collecting, tapestry-hanging, mutual love of loud, Led Zeppelin, and hard, classic rock.

I wrote this **entire sermon** listening to Led Zeppelin, I’ll have you know. I had it playing in the background, just to channel some of Gordon’s spirit.

But even for **me**, to hear “Stairway to Heaven,” rocking in heavy rotation out of his phone...in such a fraught time and scary place...it was bewildering.

To the people who know Gordy’s love of music, however, **you** understand: it wasn’t out of place at **all**.

That music was like **air** to Gordy. Music was his strength. Music was his passion. Music was his grace.

And that’s why Led Zeppelin was boosted way up, right in his ear, during a crisis of darkness and terror.

Gordy and Evelyn and Amanda knew that music would comfort him and strengthen him.

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**T**he sound of grace, the taste of justice, the excitement of feasting, of learning, the treasure of family and friends, of loving, and, for us, the sound and bitter taste of our loss, played alongside the soundtrack of God’s promise: the insistent, hard-rocking melody of new life.

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And so, therefore, a kind of **grace** was on heavy rotation for Gordy in the ICU.

Grace was, and is, on heavy rotation, in the life, death, and resurrection of The Rev. Gordon Straw.

And that grace was, and is, on heavy rotation, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, whom Gordy loved. The Jesus he served, and the Jesus he followed.

If we are to honor the faith of The Rev. Gordon Straw, then grace had better be on heavy rotation during this sermon, Amen?

And if we are to honor the faith of The Rev. Gordon Straw, then what **springs forth from grace**—a life, joyfully oriented toward justice and transformation—had **also** better be on heavy rotation, Amen?

Or, as chef Gordy might have said, “Grace had better be on the menu.” In Gordon’s best barbecue sauce, shall we say.

So let’s put a record on, shall we, in the Spirit of Gordon—a sermon LP that spins with the sounds Gordy lived for. Let’s serve up a feast, with some heavy music in the background.

The sound of grace, the taste of justice, the excitement of feasting, of learning, the treasure of family and friends, of loving, and, for us, the sound and bitter taste of our loss, played alongside the soundtrack of God’s promise: the insistent, hard-rocking melody of new life.

Last summer, Clare and I with our kids were at the annual

Pow Wow up in Baraga, Michigan, and one of the vendors had these **amazing** shirts and hoodies and hats. One of their featured sweatshirts screamed the words: “Sage Against the Machine.” Ok? **Sage Against the Machine.**

Which is, of course, damned brilliant.

I showed a photo of it to Gordy after we got back, and he loved it.

I first met Prairie Rose at the hospital, and as we were getting to know each other, I asked her about it, too: “Oh, yeah,” she said. “My ‘Sage Against the Machine’ sweatshirt has been worn so much, it’s got holes in it.”

I don’t know how many of you are “**Rage** Against the Machine” fans, but when they blasted on the music scene in the mid-1990s, my love of heavy music, hip hop, and social justice combined into a sonic experience like no other. The native apparel company at the Pow Wow cleverly spun that well-known band name into their own, powerful call to action: it became “**Sage** Against the Machine.” And such a call to action begs to be lifted up this afternoon, as we meditate on Gordon’s life, his ministry, and his death.

“**Sage** Against the Machine,” is what they chose for their shirts. Not “Rage Against the Machine,” although that is certainly warranted from a Native perspective.

Sage. It’s what opened up Gordon’s memorial service today. Sage is what Prairie Rose brushed over Gordon’s body during his commendation in the ICU, the day he died.

Sage is one of the most important Native ceremonial plants, used by many tribes as an incense, a purifying herb.

Sage—**sweetgrass**—symbolizes protection and healing, and is considered to be able to drive out evil.

And so to claim the phrase, “Sage Against the Machine,” says a lot about Indigenous peoples’ legacy, the ongoing spirit of resistance, and the future **character** of that resistance.

Because no matter how hard you try, you can’t kill healing incense, rising up on eagle’s wings, Amen?

You can’t kill the spirit of protective prayers, Amen?

You can’t wipe out the spirit of healing, and the presence of sweetgrass in native lands, or in people’s souls.

Amen?

Sage against the machine proclaims that the power of spiritual protection and healing will be used not to **destroy** the machine, but to **confound** the machine. To transform the machine. To invite the machine to confess, and to be made new.

To add in Gordy’s Lutheran identity a bit here: “sage against the machine” could simultaneously be compared to “grace against the machine.” Right?

That loud playlist at his bedside, the blasting of “Stairway to Heaven,” was Gordy’s sage against the machine, Amen? It was his grace against the machine.

Literally.

For there he was, surrounded by machines in the ICU unit. There he was, surrounded by the machine of his infections and the cancer in his body.

## Gordy lived a life that symbolized the grace and healing and protection of sage, thanks be to God.

He had been poked, he’d been prodded, for weeks, with Evelyn and Amanda and dear friends and family supporting him as best we could.

But that Led Zeppelin dose of incense, and his whole smoking playlist as he struggled there in the ICU—that was Gordon’s sage against the machine.

It was loud. It was long. It was strong. Grace against the machine.

Gordy lived a life that symbolized the grace and healing and protection of sage, thanks be to God.

The use of sage is a **repeated ritual** of protection and healing. It’s understood that native communities need it, over and over again, to make the journey through life, and into death.

It’s very similar to a Christian need for the proclamation of the gospel. Similar to a Christian need for the eucharist. A repeated ritual of protection and healing that helps us in our struggle against the machine.

And Gordy and Evelyn and Amanda so relied on the need for sage, and healing rituals, while Gordon was in the hospital.

The machine was cantankerous, and unstoppable. The machine was insistent, and terrifying. The machine was greedy, taking more and more out of Gordon and Evelyn and Amanda. But sage—and God’s grace—appeared for them in so many ways.

- Sage against the machine was your visits, your calls, your cards—they leaned on you, and drank in your presence, and your prayers.
- Sage against the machine is your bandanas. Sage against the machine was the meals you sent.
- Sage against the machine was the anonymous blood donated to keep Gordon alive.
- And finally, mercifully, it was sage against the machine, being lovingly passed over Gordon’s body, during his commendation in the ICU.

The moment Gordon made his transition from this life into his new life with God, I will never forget when Evelyn cried out, “No more poking! No more prodding!” Right, Evelyn?

You tore off Gordon’s blood pressure cuff; you knew his desire to be set free from the machine, the need to get the machines away from him, to have his body and spirit released, and purified.

And so he was. And so he lives anew.

Gordon employed sage against the machine his whole life. He was inspired by the way Jesus Christ applied grace within his own ministry to transform the machine.

The machine for Jesus was the temple complex in Jerusalem, a puppet government sideshow of the Roman Empire, one that so often failed to care for its own Jewish people. The machine was poverty and debt and divisions, between Jesus' people and the Samaritans and the Gentiles. The machine was disease and destruction and despair. The machine was the Roman Occupation, itself. The machine, for all of Gordon's life, is the ongoing occupation of native lands here in the United States, and the ongoing gears of homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism—all the wounds and injustices Gordon felt and bore witness to.

One of my favorite theological refrains is this: "How we fight is the fight itself." How we fight is the fight itself.

And Gordon understood the fight in front of him required sage.

Because he **simultaneously** understood that **he** needed sage, that **he** needed God's grace, in his own broken heart.

Anybody here remember when Gordon took a long break from Facebook? I remember when Gordon took a long break from Facebook. **All of a sudden, my Facebook feed had nothing in it.**

Gordy was a Facebook fire-breather for justice issues. Posting, re-posting, writing, raging, crying out. But even Gordy knew that our justified rage and anger becomes its own worst demon, turning against ourselves, corroding our hearts.

Rage against the machine is often necessary, but it's no creed for Christians. As Gordon learned, too much of it will destroy your hope. It is ultimately dismissive of God's stubborn joy, a joy Gordon needed to return to—a fountain of grace and forgiveness that revitalized his justice work, keeping him balanced and open to learning more about himself, and about how to be a more effective advocate for others.

Gordon, as a disciple, knew he needed God's sage to fight against his **own** machine, and as a pastor, he needed to use sage to heal his **parishioners'** machines. He was constantly looking toward others' machines, how to listen to them, to speak to them, to help heal them.

One night, while Evelyn and Gordon were in the hospital, Gordon asked me to come out there, honestly sharing his urgent need for pastoral care.

So, Clare and I jumped into the car to ride out to Lutheran General, arriving around 7pm. The whole way out there, I'm thinking, "Gordon must have had another complication, or, he's scared about the way the chemo is going." I don't know. I feared the worst.

But when we got there, and sat down, Gordon didn't want to talk about any of that. The reason Gordon needed me, was because he and Evelyn just heard the terrible news about Prairie Rose's brother, Daniel Seminole. Daniel had been shot just that day, by the police. And Gordon was so broken by that news, from the standpoint of his affection and connection with Prairie Rose. But he was also broken with concern and anger around the circumstances of Daniel's death, lifting up the cry that Native Lives Matter.

I remember holding Gordon's hand as he wept, and tenderly

**The machine, for all of Gordon's life, is the ongoing occupation of native lands here in the United States, and the ongoing gears of homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism—all the wounds and injustices Gordon felt and bore witness to.**

thinking, "This is so like you, Gordon. It's so like Evelyn, too. In the midst of your own horrific suffering and terror, your hearts are oriented toward others' suffering."

The machine had struck again, and Gordon yearned to be sage for Prairie Rose. And he, himself, needed the sage of the Eucharist that night to hold his anger, to hold his grief, and enhance his prayers for Daniel and his family. After he received the bread and the wine, he said, in an insistent whisper, "The tangible sign of God's grace."

Look to Galatians 3, in the readings chosen for today, for sage against the machine. In these revolutionary verses lies Gordon's dedication to Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, and his advocacy and alliance with the LGBTQ+ Lutheran community: it's right there.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Look to the Isaiah 58 reading for sage against the machine.

There is **so much** of Gordon, here.

A clear shout for justice and judgment, but it moves toward a reconciling promise: the "repairers of the breach," God's loving will toward transformation and restoration.

The quiet radicalism of Gordon's discipleship, and his being a pastor, is there. Leading with both love and justice, a Hebrew poetry dance of sage against the machine.

And sage against the machine is the wine at the Cana wedding feast, Amen? The best wine, the finest scotch, representing how Gordon loved good food, loved how it brought people together... how he loved to teach and preach the theology of the feast.

It's all so much, and it's all too much, and it's also not enough.

It's not enough for Evelyn. It's not enough for Amanda. It's not enough for us, who loved and lived with our friend, our pastor, our instructor, our chef, our activist, our writer, and our pourer of the finest scotch. It's all too much, and it's also not enough. Gordon, my friend, my teacher: you are dearly missed.

I believe Gordon, the pastor, who did so many funerals himself, would primarily want me to hand over sage to you, in this moment.

He'd want me to hand over God's grace, to confront the machine in you.

Pastor Gordon knew that funerals weren't for the dead; funerals are for us, the living.

And they are one of the most important opportunities for ministers of the gospel to just hand it over, already.

Gordon and I used to lament that most pastors preach **about** the gospel, but rarely **preach** the gospel. I've defaulted to that too many times, myself. But not today. Not when Gordon is here. So:

You are **so loved**. Amen?

You are. Gordon loved this direct, look-you-in-the-eye-and-hand-it-over-gospel, he loved to hear it, he loved to share it.

You are so loved.

See? I'm not preaching **about** anything, ok? I am preaching **the thing**, right here.

You are forgiven. Breathe in the sweet and insistent sage of God's forgiveness.

God knows your machine. God sees your gears. God counts your bolts. God understands your belts and your wires and tubes.

But Jesus, your grace and your sage, went to the cross to dismantle your machine, dismantle and redeem the machine of empire, greed, and despair.

To heal you. To protect you, to free you—as Jesus finally freed Gordon—and to speak a new story into your heart.

To heal this broken and beautiful world.

To bring us to the great feast, in this life and the next.

That feast has always been for you. And for the entire world.

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**G**ordon is at the feast, loving us.  
Working for justice through Jesus'  
spirit, with and for us. Hoping we'll  
turn Zeppelin up to volume 11, and  
enjoy the abundance all around us, even  
now, in our grief.

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A feast where we believe Gordon is with God, and praying for us in our time together, and the time we have left to serve God in these forms, on this precious earth.

Gordon is at the feast, loving us. Working for justice through Jesus' spirit, with and for us. Hoping we'll turn Zeppelin up to volume 11, and enjoy the abundance all around us, even now, in our grief.

Evelyn has been saying, since Gordon died, that Gordon is still teaching.

Gordon is still teaching. Amen.

And I know exactly what he's teaching.

There's no quiz. No test.

Just lots of sage. A feast of grace. For everyone. Amen.