

# WE ARE THE CHURCH...TOGETHER: IN MUSIC

Colossians 3:12-17  
October 2, 2011; 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time, a  
World Communion Sunday  
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Idlewild Presbyterian Church

*Prayer: Open my mouth, and let me bear, gladly the warm truth everywhere;  
Open my heart, and let me prepare, love with thy children thus to share.  
Silently now I wait for Thee. Ready my God, Thy will to see;  
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit Divine. (Hymn 324)*

**It might** seem odd to preach on music as we seek to encourage our members and friends to financially support the ministries of this congregation for the coming year. It is odd, I suppose. But it seems to me, that at a time in history when too many American churches seem to be either local branches of the Christian right or largely-- and safely--irrelevant to anything beyond the personal that is going on in the world, it is important to lift up some of these core purposes for which the church came into being. Like last week's mandate to open wide our doors (and roofs!) so that we might share the Gospel of God's love.

But it is not odd to focus on music on this World Communion Sunday, for it is music that binds us together with the church around the world. I'll never forget worshipping in a small El Salvadoran community, Las Minas, among the poorest of the poor. There were two men and a woman leading the singing, all playing an instrument of some kind...mostly guitars. Some of the hymns I hadn't heard, but then I heard a tune; it was familiar; and I could pick out a few words. It was a hymn in our hymnbook: "Lord, you have come to the lakeshore, looking neither for wise nor for wealthy. You only wanted that I should follow." Those words have a new meaning when we are singing them with the poorest of the poor.

Our faith was born in song. The very first act upon escaping Pharaoh's henchmen and landing in the promised land was to sing. Moses and then Miriam led in songs: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously."

Music and song accompanied the people of God as they made their way to Jerusalem. When the temple was built, they processed through the streets singing. In a little known segment of biblical history, when word reached King Jehoshaphat in Jerusalem that some of his neighbors to the south were planning on attacking that city, he organized a choir and had them lead into battle. II Chronicles says that "as they began to sing and praise....[the enemy] was routed."

Now, I don't know what to make of that, but it seems as though the biblical writers felt that the choir had something to do with that. Maybe the choir was absolutely magnificent, singing so beautifully that the spirits of the soldiers were aroused to great faith and courage. Maybe the choir was awful and their tortured song repulsed the enemy. The point is, this story was included in our faith history because the Chronicler wanted the reader to have a sense that the choirs and instrumentalists are all important parts of a larger whole, which cannot experience joy or success unless all parts work together for the common goal, which is stated at the end of the story, "to give thanks to the Lord, whose steadfast love endures forever."

And when the temple was destroyed and Jerusalem left in rubble, and the people of God were sent into exile...slavery...in Babylon, they were so low they didn't even know if they could sing any more. "By the rivers of Babylon we lay down and wept when we remembered Zion."

Our own Christian faith begins in song. When Mary found out that she, a lowly peasant girl, had been chosen by God to give birth to the very Son of God, she sang: " My soul magnifies the Lord."

What would the birth of Christ be without the angels singing in heaven? "Gloria in excelsis deo."

Do you remember the final act that Jesus had with his disciples? It was a hymn they sang there in the upper room.

And there is Paul, the first great theologian of the church, trained in the intricate matters of religion and law, is pouring his heart out to the church at Rome, wrestling with one of the most important theological issues of his day, and he gets a song in his head and starts singing a hymn: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God." He instructed his readers to sing "songs, psalms, and spiritual songs to God with gratitude in your hearts.

In the early Christian movement, music was an important to worship as any other part of the service, that—in fact—it was more conducive to the support of the communal aspects of the liturgy than anything else that happened in the service.

Can you see why? Music, especially music created by the human voice, is an activity which makes use of and creates variations on the natural processes of the body: It has rhythm—a time signature which relates to the beating of the human heart; it uses the breath in a variety of ways (natural and learned) to create different tones and moods. Scientists tell us that music stimulates a reaction within the limbic system of the brain, evoking emotion at a level much deeper and more basic than language alone can achieve, giving music a power to affect not only emotion, but also memory at both a conscious and also a sub-conscious level.

My grandfather played the mandolin. He was the president of the mandolin orchestra at the University of Illinois in 1915. In his later years, as his memory began to slip, as he couldn't

remember who was near to him and dear to him, we would hand him a mandolin, and he played those pieces he learned 60-70 years previously.

So the early church realized that power, and knew that singing could serve as a unique sign of the fusing together of the many into one—as a variety of voices singing at the same time, in the same rhythm could blend into a sound heard by the human ear as a single voice—the voice of the community. Thus could differences of race, or status, be erased in the act of making communal music.

An early bishop of the church, John of Chrysostom, preached these words to his flock in 398:

“The psalm which we just sang blended all voices together, and caused one single fully harmonious chant to arise: young and old, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and free, all sang one single melody...All the inequalities of social life are here banished. Together we make up a single choir in perfect equality of rights and expression whereby earth imitates heaven. Such is the noble character of the church.”<sup>1</sup>

There certainly have been changes in the types and styles of music in the church through the years. Until the Reformation singing was more or less limited to the professional choirs, cantors, and clergy. But Martin Luther came along, and congregational hymn-singing developed. He found some of his best tunes in the taverns around Germany. “A Mighty Fortress is our God” is an old drinking tune!

When the greatest theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Barth, who wrote volume upon volume of his *Church Dogmatics* was asked by a seminarian when he visited this country, “So, Dr. Barth, how would you summarize all of your theology?” You know what he said? He sang a song. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so....Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me.”

Music can do what nothing else can. Anne Lamott, a self-described former alcoholic and drug addict offers an off beat testimony to the evangelical power of congregational singing in her book *Traveling Mercies*. It was her habit to shop on Sunday mornings at the outdoor market in Marin City where she would hear the sound of spirituals drifting from the open windows of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church nearby. For months she stood outside the door to listen to the singing and then, one day, walked into the sanctuary and stood at the back, listening. She always left before the sermon until an observant parishioner (good evangelist that she was!) invited her to stay, and Anne discovered that the singing had prepared her better than she know to become a part—hesitant at first—of a community of believers.

Now Steve, all this is well and good, you say, but what does this have to do with us today? Well, there was a time in which virtually everyone, whether in church or not, sang. People sang in taverns, at gatherings around pianos or accordions or guitars on Saturday nights. I grew up singing. Those were long trips from Virginia to Texas every summer, without air conditioning,

Gameboys, ipods, cellphones, DVD's. We'd sing. But we live in a time when there are few opportunities to sing outside of church—and many churches have for the last 30 years or so, been using more and more electronic music both recorded and praise bands with singers. Music is everywhere: on the radio, on CD's, on our Ipods, downloaded on computers, on music videos. But we are a generation that *passively* consumes music more often than we make music.

John Bell, who has preached here and has led us in congregational singing, sounded a lot like John of Chrysostom centuries earlier was asked why singing is so important. "Because everyone can join in doing it. We are doing something together for God. (Sounds like a pretty good stewardship theme, doesn't it?)

He says that congregational singing is an identity-shaping experience...that we are in an era in which communities can be re-shaped by what we sing. Are we sectarian, denominationally and nationally bound Christians or are we global Christians? The songs of the church will tell us that. It will tell us whether we are male-dominated or whether the body of Christ is made in God's image as much through its female members as its male members.<sup>2</sup> He adds " a great deal of our singing has had images of soldiers and warriors, but never mid-wives. God blesses mid-wives, but we've never sung "mid-wives of God arise."

There is one other thing that music does for the church. John Bell, a great collector of world music, tells of meeting a musician from El Salvador and asking him to teach him one of his hymns. "He gave me the text in Spanish," Bell recalls, "which I had translated into English so I could try to fit the English text to the Hispanic tune. When I looked at the words I saw that they were far too political—all about corrupt judges and corrupt courts. Then I discovered it was Psalm 94."

"By teaching me that song he opened me to the witness in the Psalms of God's preferential option for the poor and of God's engagement in matters of social justice. Otherwise I would not have known that. I would have sung and read the Psalms as private spiritual nuggets and never known that they had a political and economic dimension.<sup>3</sup> When we gathered here a month ago with 90 voices and an orchestra singing a memorial piece to those who died on 9/11, it was only music that could do what it did.

Friends, there is no other institution I can think of in our society that offers such a gift from cradle to grave. From learning "Jesus Loves me," from my grandmother, a church organist; to the "Do Lord, O Do Lord, O do remember me" of my camp days; to "Lord of the Dance" of my youth; to "They'll know we are Christians by our Love" of my college years, to new favorites I have learned with you. I know more hymn texts by heart than I do scripture. And "by heart" is the best way I know to describe how I know them. When I sing these hymns, old or new—wherever I am—there is a great cloud of witnesses present with me.

It is the task of the church alone to teach us—and to give us the opportunity on a regular basis—to sing our joy.

As we are considering how we might support Idlewild Presbyterian Church for the coming year, we might keep in mind this unique contribution that music makes to our lives.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>John Chrysostom, Hom. 5; PG 63.486-7; Quoted by J. Gelineau, *The Study of the Liturgy*, Editors: Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yanolds, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. P. 440.

<sup>2</sup>John Bell, "Sing A New Song," *Christian Century*, July 25, 2006. Pp. 20-23.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.