

To God be the Glory

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Psalm 150

Dean Lueking, a Lutheran pastor, shares this story: “As a seminarian I lived with a non-Christian, Japanese family, while doing a church internship in Japan. One Sunday they came with me to visit the little Yokohama mission congregation I was serving. Following the service, they came to me and exclaimed with wonder, ‘You Christians sing your faith!’” “Make a joyful noise to the Lord...”

A couple more hymn-related stories – Lueking, again, shares this personal reflection: “In my late teens, unsure of what path I should take into my future, I attended a Sunday evening service in a country church. I was exhausted after a week of baling hay and altogether unprepared for what was coming. Then, during the worship service, I sang, ‘Here am I, send me, send me.’ And the Lord took me up on it. Years later, I remain grateful that Christ is still calling and still sending.” His call to ministry...first coming through music. Yes, we sing our faith.

And this story shared by a pastor: “One morning a man told me that in worship we had sung a hymn he had known since childhood, but this particular morning he had felt its truth as never before. ‘God never will forsake in need, the soul that trusts in him indeed,’ was the hymn passage. For years following the birth of their son, his wife had suffered a postpartum depression that had descended into full-blown oblivion. She knew no one, rejected everyone. His care for her was unending, but he wasn’t sure how much longer he could go on. He told me that in our worship service that morning, singing that particular hymn, he had been given a new freedom, a new grace, to care for himself and the good woman he had married.” New hope, new direction, found in the singing of a familiar hymn. Yes, around here, we sing our faith.

In our church, over the last few years – and I am so thankful that Brian and Darryl, Karna and Andy and Jan, and all our talented musicians and singers have caught the vision – we have been attempting to do something that many church gurus say is impossible...will never work. We have drawn on the talents of so many of our church folks and made the commitment to accompany our worship services with various styles of music. Choir and organ, handbells, children’s choir, jazz group, brass, Keith and Jan and the acoustic group, the new band with Dave and Paula, Darryl and Nils, the music put together by Vince and Hosanna and friends, soloists and others have all contributed to our Sunday worship. Rather than go to two worship services, as I have been advised we should do, we have made the attempt to blend them into one – different music every week. And you, the members and friends of our church, have been wonderfully patient and accepting of all this, even on those mornings when the music may not have been your cup of tea. But why all this attention to music, to making a joyful noise, to including so many people in our Sunday music?

Now I suppose that music could be seen, indeed as worship often has been seen, as simply an escape from the responsibilities, challenges and routines of daily life – as a way to get away from or even avoid the “real” world for a little while. And indeed, that kind of occasional retreat is not necessarily a bad thing. If worship can be just that for you from time to time, then by all means take advantage of it. But there is more...there is more.

Recall the old Biblical story of King Saul and young David, the future king who also happened to be a harpist. When Saul, the bewildered and battered old king, began to lose touch with reality, he called on David to play the harp for him. It calmed him down, enabled him to re-focus. Rather than being an escape from reality, music made it possible for Saul to see reality once again. Music was not a means of running away from the truth. Rather it enabled him to get up and run toward the truth.

Johann Sebastian Bach, whose music touches us still – did you know that almost every week of his long life, he wrote and rehearsed an original composition for organ and/or choirs? – insisted that there is something in music, as in all great art, which reaches upward and outwards toward eternity. It is not an escape. It is a transformation. Bach believed that great music – like great religion – does not take us away from the world, but rather raises us above the world, where we can begin to see more clearly what is true, what does matter most, and how life really can and should be.

I want to return to music variety for a moment. I often talk with my father in Arizona on Sundays after we both return home from church. He has been a member of The Church of Beatitudes in Phoenix, where I was ordained, for over 50 years. And for 50 years he has believed that the only way to properly worship God is with a robed adult choir singing one anthem, accompanied by an organ. And whenever the Sunday service and music are anything other than that – God forbid they use guitars - boy do I hear about it. Sometimes I think he forgets what I do for a living! This is a man who, when it comes to worship, hates variety. I still haven't worked up the courage to tell him that our daughter – his granddaughter – Bethany, played her guitar and sang during her ordination service in this sanctuary. Sometimes, after talking with my Dad, whom I love very much which is probably why he can drive me so crazy, I am reminded of an old cartoon. It shows a cemetery next to a church. At the center of the frame is the tombstone of a clergyman on which is written this epitaph: "He tried to change the Sunday morning music." Again, I am so thankful for you and your willingness to try something new on Sundays.

Yes, I and Kristen and our music staff spend a lot of time thinking about and planning music. We know how powerful music can be, that regardless of our age or situation, music is such a formative part of our religious experience. You hear "Holy, Holy Holy", "Amazing Grace" "I Was There to Hear Your Morning Cry," or perhaps a camp song, such as "I Am One Voice," and a flood of memories and emotions is released. Tex Sample, a sociologist who studies worship tells a story on himself. He is not a big fan of the hymn, "In the Garden," finding it too syrupy sweet, sentimental, cliché-ridden and self-centered. One day, he made fun of it in class, singing a parody of it using his most whiny, nasal voice. After class a 35-year-old woman asked if she could speak to him. She told him that her father had sexually abused her from the time she was 11 until she was 16, at which point she found the strength to put a stop to it. She said that after each horrible incident, she would go outside the house and sing to herself, "And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own..." She told Sample, "Without that song, I don't know how I could have survived. Please, don't you ever...ever...ever...make fun of that song in my presence again." It may not be an exaggeration to say that we get our theology far more from the hymns we sing than from the sermons we hear.

And so we use a variety of music because this congregation is a variety of people, and each of us is going to respond to the music of worship in a different way. Some love to sing a familiar song to the pipe organ and hear a stirring anthem from the choir. Others can't wait until the kids sing again or the bells play again. Others are moved to tears when Darryl, Nils, Paula and Dave play and sing...perhaps an old song to a new beat.(by the way, if you come to Darryl's concert on June 16th, you will know that we have our own Bach with us each and every Sunday!)

Speaking of Bach, on each piece of music he wrote, he inscribed the words, "Soli Deo Gloria...The Glory Be to God Alone." Finally, isn't that is what it is all about? When we come together to sing the faith, whatever the style of music, what matters most is that it opens us to a relationship with the living God, enables us, at least for a moment, to glimpse something over and above and beyond that is both incredible and possible, encourages us and opens us to new truths and deeper faith. Singing together, becomes in the words of one scholar, "a powerful alloy of memory and emotion, experience and conviction, expression and aspiration."

And so, Sunday after Sunday, we keep singing and making music. And it is not without rough edges. Sometimes we hit, sometimes we miss. But we keep singing. And we do this, because along the way, as we worship and sing together, we just might discover that surely the Lord is in this place.