

Sermon: "Sing, Sing, Sing"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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LEARNING TO HEAR ANGELS

Mark, our organist and choir director has a mysterious sounding stop on his keyboard that he sometimes adds to our music. It sounds almost like voices, this heavenly organ stop. Some of us in the choir jokingly say that it is the sound of angels. We say that every anthem needs that heavenly touch, the sound of angels.

What we say in jest might be closer to the truth than we think. Indeed, I believe this is why music in the church is so important. We are, in a sense, listening for the sound of angels.

But, first, let me take just a few moments to say what music in the church is not. Music in the church is not entertainment. Music in the church is not an opportunity for some of us to show off our talent (or lack thereof). Music in the church is not background music for our conversation as the service begins!

Music in the church is an aid to worship. It is a way of communicating a divine message through song. We often use words, but the intent is to convey a message that takes us beyond the words. To put it another way, the goal of music in the church is the lofty goal of enabling us to hear God's message with our hearts as well as with our heads.

PRAISE THE LORD TIMES TEN

But, in order for that to happen, those who sing, those who play and those who listen must have the same goal. That goal is to worship and praise God. Some of you may once again be thinking about the first question and answer of the shorter catechism. What is the chief end of [men and women]? The chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

The same sentiment was expressed in our Psalm for today, Psalm 150. This Psalm begins and ends with the same command. "Praise the Lord." In fact, the call to praise God or praise Him is repeated ten times in this Psalm. That may sound rather monotonous as we read it. But, there is a point to the repetition. It is to drive home the fact that the praise of God is the whole purpose of worship and also of life itself.

If you want to do a quick check of your motives, ask yourself, "Why am I doing this? Why am I singing this song? Why am I reading this book? What gives me pleasure and why?" According to this Psalm, everything we do should be done to praise the Lord.

But, praise doesn't have to be boring. Far from it. Notice the wide variety of ways that people are encouraged to praise God in this Psalm. They are to praise him with trumpet, lute and harp. They are to praise him with tambourine and dance. They are to praise him with strings and pipe. I think Peterson really gets to the heart of this passage with his dynamic translation.

He translates verses 4 and 5,

Praise him with castanets and dance,
praise him with banjo and flute;
Praise him with cymbals and a big bass drum,
praise him with fiddles and mandolin.

In other words, worship should not be a boring experience! Bring in the electric guitars and drum sets. Fill the choir with glorious voices. Crank up the organ to a majestic volume. Use liturgical dance. Sing the old gospel songs. Sing praise and worship songs. Sing the traditional songs. Sing from the new blue book. Sing from the old red books. Use rock and country and jazz and classical music. Sing, sing, sing the Psalmist tells us.

There is only one stipulation. Whether we sing loud or soft, classical or country, our singing must be to the glory of God alone. Some of the greatest music the world has ever known was written with that proviso written right in the preface, to the glory of God alone. The old masters just didn't do that as a matter of form. They did it as a matter of conviction. It wasn't just about the music. It was about the faith that inspired the music.

ME FIRST MUSIC

The great Swedish movie director, Ingmar Bergman said in an interview, "It is my opinion that art lost its basic creative drive the moment it was separated from worship. It severed an umbilical cord and now lives its own sterile life, generating and degenerating itself. In the former days, the artist remained unknown and his work was to the glory of God Today the individual has become the highest form and the greatest bane of artistic creation.... The individualists stare into each other's eyes and deny the existence of each other."

This "me first" approach to life is seen not only in the world of music and drama. It is seen in the business world, and especially it is seen in the world of sports. We look at these overgrown spoiled brats and wonder why our society puts up with them. They make millions of dollars; have the disconcerting habit of talking about themselves in the third person and think that no law of society was ever meant to apply to them.

But, lest we get to smug in our evaluations of others, we in the church have the same problem. Our stated goal is to glorify God alone. But, sometimes our stated goal and what we actually do are at odds. In some cases we have turned the minister into a celebrity, the choir into an entertainment and the church into a glorious example of success. Even worship can be used for a purpose other than the glory of God.

That's why we need Psalm 150 and its admonition ten times over. Praise God, praise him, praise him, praise him. It is a belief that must be burned into our hearts and minds. It must be a guiding principle not only for our music but for our life as well. Glorifying God and God alone must be our passion in life. It is why we were created. It is our reason for being.

A VISION OF GLORY

In Revelation 21 there is an image of this glory. The writer speaks of hearing the voices of angels, living creatures, elders, all surrounding the throne "singing with full voice." The music reaches a crescendo as "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth in the sea" joins in the song. Talk about your special music! Every creature on the face of the earth sings for all they are worth. They sing, "Worthy is the lamb."

This is the vision I want all of us to have in our hearts each Sunday as we sing and read the liturgy and listen to the words of Scripture. I want us to look up instead of about. I want us to be so captivated by the glory of God that we are not distracted by things that do not really matter. I want us to break forth in song in response to a greater vision.

It's appropriate that we think about the importance of music during our fifty day celebration of Easter. When it comes to the glory of the resurrection, singing seems more to the point than anything we are able to say. With news so glorious and good, what can we do but sing?

Probably one of the best loved hymns of all time is Amazing Grace. “Amazing grace how sweet the sound ...” I think this hymn is popular because it summarizes what is necessary for true worship, amazement. The point of worship is to gaze with utter amazement, utter astonishment upon the gracious, saving love of God in Christ. This is the focus of our worship. Worship is not a time for pride in our accomplishments or a statement of what we need to do. Worship is a time to declare what God has already done for us in Christ Jesus.

MUSIC AND MISSION

Now some of you may be thinking, “Well, all this heavenly talk about glorifying God and praising God in song sounds good, but what does that have to do with our work here on earth? What does that have to do with the kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, a kingdom that challenges us to promote healing and peace and justice here and now. Isn’t there a danger that we will sing while all around us the world is tumbling down?”

That can happen. It is possible to be so “heavenly minded that we’re of no earthly good.” It is possible to be so “spiritual” that we ignore our brother and sister in need. We can even give “spiritual” reasons for doing the wrong thing.

But, that doesn’t have to be the case if we worship God in Spirit and in Truth. In fact, the Bible tells us that right worship leads to right action. Singing the right song can make us better, and singing the wrong song can make us worse.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans makes a laundry list of the world’s most infamous sins, things like: envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossip, sexual perversion and idolatry. You know what he means. It’s all that stuff we read about in the morning paper and watch on the evening news.

Paul asked the same question that we ask all the time. Why all this bad behavior? What’s going on? We have our answers to that question. People behave badly because they don’t respect and obey the law. They behave badly because they don’t live according to the rules of the Bible. Perhaps people behave badly because they have too much. Affluence and immorality sometimes go hand-in-hand.

All that’s true to an extent, but Paul gives a different reason for all the bad behavior in the world. Paul says that people behave badly because they worship the wrong things. They sing praises to creatures instead of the Creator.

According to the apostle, what we sing about makes a difference in our behavior. Sing a doxology to a false God, and the next thing you know we will find ourselves wallowing in complete moral chaos.

OUR SONGS

I don’t know if you have listened to what some people have been singing recently, but I have. I don’t have a choice. As the children from my neighborhood drive their “tricked out” cars home, I hear the songs they sing.

The expletives that should have been deleted penetrate right through the walls of my home along with the thumping of the bass line! If Paul is right, our society is in a world of trouble. But, this is not a new problem.

For example, the prophet Isaiah strongly warned his people about singing the wrong songs. Isaiah wrote (5:11-12),

“Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening till wine enflames them! They have lyre and harp, timbrel and flute and wine at their feasts; but they do not regard the deeds of the Lord, or see the work of his hands.”

The people had made drinking and having a good time the most important thing in their lives. They lived without any reference to God. Their songs were about nothing but their own pleasure. Sound familiar?

The result of “singing the wrong song?” The prophet wrote, “Therefore my people go into exile for want of knowledge.” The result of living without reference to God is a self imposed exile. No matter how much we crank up the volume of our songs, if we do not sing for the right reason, the joy is fleeting. There is a sense of emptiness and hopelessness.

A NEW SONG

So how do we counter all those false songs? The most effective way to counter a bad song is by singing something different. If we can sing what the Bible calls a “new song,” God’s own song, we can become a part of a kingdom that will make a real change in our life and in our world.

According to one commentator, “The word liturgy means literally, ‘the work of the people.’ Worship is the work of the people of God. Our Christian ethics are one with our Christian worship. The test for Sunday is what we do on Monday. The energy and rationale for what we do on Monday is what we have sung on Sunday.... Worship is the work we do for God. Loving the poor, working against injustice is the praise we sing to God.”

Paul put it this way in his letter to the Colossians (3:17),

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” In other words, all of life is a kind of song to God’s glory.

Have you ever gotten a song stuck in your mind, and it won’t go away? We all have. Quite often it is a commercial jingle of some sort. I guess they’re designed it to stick in our minds with a message of greed and desire.

But, it is possible to imprint a different song in our hearts. Sometimes Mark or Steve in an effort to help us learn a song would give us a recording on tape. Listening to the song on tape throughout the week really helped us learn it.

But, I noticed that it did something else for me. It implanted the message of that song on my heart. And as I went about my daily routine, I was affected for the better by that song.

LEARNING TO SING GOD’S SONG

I think it would be a good thing for all of us to learn how to sing praise to God. Even if you’re not a good singer, become a good listener. Fill your life with Christian songs that speak to your heart. If you like country, there are plenty of country songs that speak to the faith. If you like rock and roll, now we have rock and roll songs that explode with energy as well as the Christian message. If you like classical music, Handel’s Messiah is ready when you are.

More than that, I would suggest that you push yourself out of your comfort zone. Try and understand and appreciate some Christian music that is not exactly your style. Listen to the Christian music produced in other countries. Read the words. Ask yourself, “What new thing does this music teach me about God’s character and glory that I need to learn?”

In Alex Haley’s book, Roots, Kunta Kinte lies on the dirt floor of his slave cabin in the New World where he has been brought from Africa. The horrors of slavery have about obliterated any

infantile memory of his native land, of who he was as a free person there. Until that night he heard a woman singing a song in a tune now strange to him, strange but irresistible. It was a song from Africa and its tune awakened long suppressed memories. He remembered that he once had a home. He remembered who he was. He wept for joy at how the music had changed him.

I don't know if this has happened to you, but quite often it has happened to me. Sometimes when I sing a hymn or an anthem, there is something deep inside me that is touched. There is a part of my soul that is changed. I remember a faith that was almost choked out of me by the weeds of the world. And sometimes I am even moved to tears.

I hear my name called, and I know, "This is who I am. This is who I am called to be."

That's why music is such an important part of worship. That's why I spend time each week thinking carefully about the message of the hymns and praise and worship songs. That's why Mark meets with the choir on Thursday and Sunday mornings to practice. It's important how we sing, and it's important what we sing.

One preacher put it this way,
"For most of us the only theology that we know, our images of God, come right out of the hymnal. A church is being formed, or malformed, by its praise. So we do well, in our selection of hymns here, not just to ask, 'Does the congregation like this one?' or 'Is this set to really good music?' but also the theological question, 'Who is the God who is being praised by this hymn? And, 'What sort of disciples are being formed by singing this?'"

Mark Twain once said something like if heaven is one endless choir rehearsal, he didn't think he would bother to try for it. As much as I like Twain, I think he's wrong on this one. Our Scripture passages for today tell us that we have been created for praise! God has made us from the very beginning to be a part of creation's great celebration of the glory of God.

If we refuse to sing or if we sing the wrong song, we only hurt ourselves. We alienate ourselves from the true source of hope. We exile ourselves from a heavenly Father who wants us to come home.

What about you? Won't you sing today? Won't you forget about your pride, forget about the person sitting next to you and sing for all you're worth to God's glory?

My daughter played a song a while back. It was a country song about a mother's wish for her child. And what was her greatest wish? That she would dance. In other words she wanted her to express the joy and music that was in her life. She wanted her to live life to the fullest.

That's my wish for my children and indeed for all of God's people. Praise God with song and dance. Pour your heart and soul into it.

You might even decide to join the "really big" choir we have planned!

Amen.