

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 June 18 2017 (Proper 6 – Church Music Sunday)
 Matthew 9:35-10:8 “Sing to God!”
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Today as we celebrate Choir Recognition Sunday, we give thanks to God for the ministry of our Choir and our Bell Choir. It's a ministry that requires many hours, much commitment, from each participant – rehearsals during the week, leading us in worship on Sunday mornings after another rehearsal – all to the glory of God as this dedicated group leads us in our liturgy. Thank you all for your presence among us! Music touches us on a level that's hard to put into words sometimes – I've always believed that the great festivals of Christmas and Easter are best celebrated through music – words alone just don't touch the mystery of these awesome and mysterious stories of our faith.

The Christian church has kept singing for two thousand years: so many examples in our Bible stories – Mary sang “my soul magnifies the Lord”, when the angels announced to the shepherds the birth of the child Jesus, a heavenly chorus joined in the news; when the crowds met Jesus as he entered Jerusalem they sang an ancient psalm of Hosanna; on the last night of his life after they had shared the meal with his disciples, they all sang a hymn and went out to Gethsemane. And earlier still, the book of Psalms was the songbook of the Hebrew people. My first Sunday here it was a delight to find St. Paul's tradition of singing the Psalms – we hear their words in a deeper, profound way when they're sung, I think.

The first exam I took in my Systematic Theology course in seminary was not what I'd have expected: we were to select one of a list of 3 advent hymns and discuss the doctrine of the person of Christ expressed in the hymn. I'll never hear the beautiful “Of the Father's Love Begotten” in the same way again after dissecting it phrase by phrase, verse by verse but it was a wonderful exercise in furthering and solidifying my understanding of and appreciation for the role of music in worship.

It's always interesting to me when after worship someone speaks of how the hymns for the day fit so well into the overall theme of the service. I'm sure you all know that's no accident – we carefully choose the hymns we'll sing during worship and James takes great care in his selection of the choral and instrumental music as well – our worship is a package and I know my hope each week is that something in the service will touch you and bring you closer to God.

Because that's the sole purpose of worship – to help each of us have an encounter with the living God. Worship is about God alone - and it's not a spectator sport – it's up to each of us to engage in the worship experience – whether touched by word or song, prayer or scripture, strains of music or by silence.

Ann Broyles writes, “When we come prepared for worship, expecting to meet God, then we are able to more fully experience that designated time and place as holy ground and sacred space. Rather than sitting back to hear what the preacher will say or how well the choir will sing, we join ourselves – body, mind, and spirit – with our

community of faith. Each of us is important to this drama. Worship is a dialogue with God and those around us. Always, when we worship, God is among us.”

She continues, “All that we do in worship is known as “liturgy”, literally this means the work of the people. There are no distinctions of “entertainer” and “audience”, but instead, a community of individuals who play different roles as they actively participate in worship together.”

Active participation in worship: that’s our call, isn’t it.

When have you felt that you truly worshipped? Felt the breathtaking awesomeness of God’s presence that brought you maybe to tears, or at the very least to humble praise and thanksgiving? Some examples of my own experience:

When a group from Glen Ridge went to South Africa on a mission trip returned they spoke over and over again of their worship experiences there – in two different small churches where they didn’t know the spoken language. But that didn’t matter – the music, the dancing during worship – that was the common language and they knew they were in the midst of God’s presence – that’s what made their worship alive and so meaningful.

Then there was the time I was invited to preach at the Bethel Church of Love and Praise in Bloomfield – we were partners in their food ministry at their soup kitchen and food pantry. When I asked how long the sermon slot usually was, they told me, about 45 minutes. I don’t know many other churches with that expectation for sure – but it was awesome! When the two hour worship service was over, there was no question that we’d had a profound worship experience. Lots of music, lots of singing – I was at the same time exhausted and energized and I knew all of us gathered had been in the presence of God through that community.

Remember when the Souls of Integrity Choir was here? Our worship experience was different, wasn’t it. For me, it’s always a time of active interaction when they are in the congregation – they talk back! Sometimes the words are intelligible, sometimes it’s an “amen”, sometimes it’s just a sound from the throat, sometimes it’s a smile and a nod. There’s a profound shared energy in worship with these folks – a deep sense of joy and gratitude in being alive in God’s presence.

Of course we all participate in worship in different ways, but their excitement is contagious and my experience says that the excitement builds on itself, enabling all of us to have a better experience of connecting to God and to each other.

What happens when we walk in the doors of this place? I’ve heard people call it a safe place – we don’t call this room a sanctuary lightly, do we. Does it feel different when we walk in? Do we feel the sacred, safe place? Of course we bring our joys and concerns, celebrations and worries with us – and isn’t this the time to offer them to God? What we do during the week doesn’t matter for this time of worship and it doesn’t matter what we’re going to do after this time of worship - what matters is that we bring our full selves into the presence of God. Every part of our liturgy is designed to help us make that connection with God, come into God’s presence, all to God’s glory.

Back to your experience of a time when you truly felt in the presence of God in your worship – what did the examples I used have in common? Music. It was the music that engaged members of our congregation in South Africa – all of them spoke of it with a sense of awe. It was music of joy, of celebration, of praise to God. It was the music at Bethel Love that pulled us all into the presence of God, opening us in ways to worship we

hadn't imagined. And it is the music of the Souls of Integrity that touches us in profound ways.

Talitha Arnold writes in her book, Worship for Vital Congregations, "In ways not even science can explain, music connects with the deepest part of our souls. Its rhythm and rhymes are often the earliest things we can remember – which is why preschoolers memorize their ABCs in song and advertisers come up with catchy jingles. Music is often the last thing we forget." She reports visiting people in nursing homes who can't remember her name or the names of their children but still know "Silent Night" by heart. I can attest to that from my own experience as well: when I lead worship at Crane's Mills in Caldwell, we sing at least 4 hymns – old, familiar ones mostly – and every person participates – even when they may appear to be unaware of their surroundings or seeming to be sleeping through the worship service.

Talitha continues, "Music can take us out of our everyday lives of paying bills, earning a living, chauffeuring kids, and immerse us in a universe of the eternal. Not only does it express our praise and longing for God, but it gives us an experience of God's divine beauty."

Music touches our feelings, sets a mood in our worship: think about how you feel when we sing, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord". Compare that experience to how we feel when we sing "Joy to the World."

Now, today we celebrate those who lead us in our music ministry and the profound gifts they bring; but we in the congregation aren't off the hook. The act of singing binds us together, makes us one – points us toward the presence of God. We're a congregation on a faith journey – we need each other – and when we come together and sing, we are one: we share an experience, we become so much more together than when we are alone. That means all of us are called to participate in the singing of the hymns, the responses.

Marva Dawn wrote in her book, Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down, a Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time, "I often hear that while the music the choir sings should, of course, be great, the congregation's singing need not be so elevated. This profoundly disturbing attitude seems to be prevalent throughout the United States."

Well, maybe some of us can barely carry a tune in a bucket so we're reluctant to sing out: but, you know, that really doesn't matter to God. Maybe it's because we are so used to being audience – but think about what happens, how you feel, when you're at a concert and the artist encourages you to sing along! What an awesome sound everyone makes! And what joy that brings, what a sense of community that brings! And isn't that what worship is all about – being together in community praising God for all our blessings. Let's remember that praising God, worshipping God, doesn't have to be in tune. So sing out to the glory of God! It's God who is the subject and object of our worship – we praise God by singing to the best of our ability.

Our inward journeys are not enough. Our lives are tangled up with everyone else's in ways beyond our knowing. So as with our singing, as in all practices of faith, we need one another. Only then, can we sing praise to our God with one voice. Let's make a joyful noise – together. And maybe, just maybe, that's a partial answer to Jesus' prayer that we may all be one and know his glory. Thank you, choir, for leading us in music, and for showing us the way! Amen.

Let us pray:

May the word of Christ dwell in us richly; and with gratitude in our hearts, may we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. Amen.