

Varied Gifts, One Spirit

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May 11, 2008: Pentecost/ Gospel in Music Sunday

When Mark asked me to do a meditation for today's service I was a little hesitant to do so because, in spite of how it may seem from the outside, I really am pretty shy about talking about what music means to me and why it is such an important part of my life and my career. Music is a deeply personal thing for many people and certainly when it comes to music in worship, those personal feelings can run even deeper because they are tied to our faith and to the very foundations of our values. Even people who don't go to church very often seem to have some understanding of the power that sacred music can play in lives and to cause us to feel deeply and even move us to action in our world.

Christians have been singing hymns for thousands of years. Whether it was in the form of chant, intricate choral music, simply folk-like tunes, or grand refrains of some of our best-loved hymns, Christians are a people that love to sing. I suspect that one of the reasons why we sing hymns in the Christian church has to do with a verse from the passion narrative from Matthew 26:30 "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." The idea that Jesus sang with his disciples at the Passover

meal is a profound image for us when we sing hymns together as his disciples in this place and time. After the meditation we'll be singing a famous hymn entitled "When In Our Music God is Glorified." One verse of this powerful poem is not included in our hymnal. It refers to the passage I just read from Matthew.

And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night
When utmost evil strove against the Light?
Then let us sing for whom he won the fight
Alleluia!

Music and worship have always gone hand-in-hand for me. From an early age I was drawn to the singing of hymns while sitting next to my Grandmother in church. I was a particularly fidgety kid, especially in church, but it seemed that music had the power to focus my attention, I suppose it still does. I think this was partly because the combination of words and music together seemed very "cool" to me and also because singing in church was a group activity that required us all to stand, to do something with a book, and to use physical energy in the act of worship. It seemed like a very "grown up" thing to do. It also made me listen and try to comprehend how the music was put together and why. As I grew older and my intellectual and spiritual life grew, I began to understand the words of the hymns as well, the real reason why hymns exist in the first place. I'm sure the same could be said for many of you that with each passing year, the meaning of the poetry of hymns makes more sense and that our life experiences cause

us to understand what some poet from the 15th century was driving at and why that sacred poetry is still alive and sung today. I never used to get chocked up singing a hymn, but, I have to admit that there are those hymns now which bring together words and music in such a way that makes me stop and reflect more deeply upon my life and my faith than I did years ago. I have become more acutely aware of why music in worship is so very important.

Music calls us to share an expressive part of ourselves in response to words and scripture. Some might say that this expressive sharing is all well and good for a person who has musical ability, but, where the human voice is concerned, I think there is no reason why even the so called "tone deaf" person shouldn't gladly raise their voice in praise through a moving hymn or a sacred song. All of the varied talents that each of us possess are gifts meant to be shared. The gift of our singing voices is one that should not be hidden. Singing in worship is a corporate activity that taps our inner spirit and one which calls us to use nearly all of our senses in response to doing it. We see the words and the music together on the page. We hear the sound of the organ, the choir, the congregation and our own voice. We touch the hymnal and feel its weight, its contents. In so much as it is possible to do so, we "taste" the words that we sing enjoying the sensation of what they feel like as we express them. And, if every hymn we sing is a prayer of some kind, and I believe that is, then we can also somehow sense the

smell of that hymn as we read in Psalm 141 “May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.”

For me, the hymnal is nearly as important to the worship experience as hearing scriptures read and interpreted. I always read the words of hymn before playing or singing it, even a tune that I know well. Reading sacred poetry or verse and then hearing those words soar with a beautiful four part voicing is thrilling and made even more exciting by the power of the pipe organ and the choir which lead us. If we each would allow ourselves to be immersed in the sounds of music and its words our understanding of the call to live with and through the Spirit becomes more clear. We are an active people. We like doing things and experiencing new things or re-experiencing familiar things again. Singing allows us to do something active, to make order out of chaos, to make words more powerful than they can be on their own, to resonate within us something we can act upon in our daily lives. It has been said that music begins when mere speech can no longer be contained. If this is true then singing in worship should be a natural response to everything else we do. This is why we place hymns and liturgical music where we do in a service; because it serves to accentuate other parts of the worship service and, hopefully, to make it more meaningful.

I haven't even mentioned my thoughts on the significance to worship of choral music, anthems, organ preludes, offertories, postludes, handbell anthems, solos etc.... Suffice it

to say that if hymns create the excitement and energy that allow each of us to glimpse the Spirit within ourselves, these other types of music give us a closer view of what makes the Spirit exist in the first place, what causes each of us to have meaning in life, what it means to live ones life with energy and commitment, what it means to work with others to create a thing of beauty and harmony, what it means to take discord and resolve it, what it means to combine all of our being into the re-creation of something that is only visual until the air is vibrating with its notes.

Johann Sebastian Bach is arguably one of the greatest composers ever to have lived and certainly the most famous church musician of any time. He had this to say about music: “The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul.” Since Pentecost is the day on which we celebrate the moving of the Spirit in our lives and the renewal of our souls, I think we could all take Bach’s words to heart. I hope you might take some time this week to open your hymnal at home and read the words of several hymns. Often, the prayer you may not be able to express on your own will have already been written for you in the form of a hymn. Or, you may discover new prayers and means of expression for your life because of this most basic act of corporate worship. I want to conclude today with a couple of verses from a Pentecost poem written by Jane Parker Huber who is one of the most prominent hymn writers in the Presbyterian Church today.

God pours the Holy Spirit
On all who would believe,
On women, men, and children
Who would God's grace receive.
That Spirit knows no limit,
Bestowing life and power.
The church, formed and reforming,
Responds in every hour.

O Spirit, sent from heaven
On that day long ago,
Rekindle faith among us
In all life's ebb and flow.
O give us ears to listen
And tongues aflame with praise,
So all of every nation
Glad songs of joy shall raise.

Let us pray:

From Colossians 3:15-17

¹⁵Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. – Amen.