

## **Sermon for June 3, 2018 – “A Joyful Noise”**

Choir Recognition Sunday, Year B – Text: Psalm 98, Psalm 100

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Chances are, for many of us our earliest memories of worship have a musical soundtrack. The majestic pipe organ, the simple and beautiful piano, the robust choir, the gentle bell choir, the woman (or man) sitting behind you who sang off-key. You may not remember many sermons you heard growing up but I bet you remember singing “How Great Thou Art” or “The Old Rugged Cross.” And, when you sang them, weren’t you moved? Didn’t you experience God’s presence in a way that words alone simply couldn’t express? I’d be willing to bet you did!

Music opens an expressive part of us, one that allows us to connect with God on a different level than a sermon or prayer does. When there’s absolutely no way to say what we feel there’s usually a song that can. A long time ago, St. Augustine of Hippo is believed to have said “Those who sing, pray twice.” More recently, Sally Brown, a preaching professor, said “Sacred singing is full-bodied prayer, an act of worship that demands head and heart and sinew, a metaphor for discipleship itself.” Music plays a big part of our theological and spiritual formation. We may not be able to articulate our theology of God’s redemption of humanity through the sacrifice of Jesus, but we can sing “Amazing Grace.” We may be at a loss for words when asked to devise an ecological perspective of the creative reign of God, but we can sing “For the Beauty of the Earth.” For many, hymns have as much influence on our beliefs as the words we hear.

This revelation is as old as the Bible itself. Miriam sings of thanksgiving after Israel crosses the Red Sea. Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon sing in response to the revelation of the gift of the Christ-child. The book of Revelation is filled with singing. And, one whole book of the Bible (the Psalms is a collection of 150 hymns and songs). All this has led us to believe that singing has long been one of the most effective and necessary ways to communicate with, and to praise, God. The importance of music is not lost on us today. Certainly not here at Westwood First where we have a long rich history of an outstanding music. Think of all the ways we use music in worship from our prelude to our hymns, to our offertory to our postlude. Music sets the tone of the service. It welcomes us in, joins us together, and sends us out. That joining together not only takes place through the singing of the same words together but in the act of singing itself. When we sing together, we’re living out the unity we have in and through Jesus Christ. Music not only joins us together as a congregation but as a universal body of Christ.

Music can transcend boundaries of time and space to bring together different faith traditions, distant cultures, and periods in time. Think about it. When we sing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” written by Martin Luther we’re singing the same hymn sung by Lutherans at the time of the Reformation and today. It’s hard to know how many hymns there are or have ever been written. We do know that many well-known hymns were written by Charles Wesley (younger brother of John Wesley) who many consider to be the greatest hymn writer of all time with about 6,500 hymns to his credit. Besides all those hymns, Wesley also gave us his “Seven Rules for Singing.” I’ve printed them in the bulletin, so I won’t list them all now but here are my favorites...

“Sing All – join the congregation as frequently as you can.

“Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you.

“If it is a cross to you, take it up and you will find a blessing.

“Sing Lustily – and with good courage.

“Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep but lift up your voice with strength.

“Be no more afraid of your voice now nor more ashamed of its being heard than when you sang the songs of Satan.

But the best one, in all seriousness is, “Sing spiritually – have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing Him more than yourself, or any other creature. This is important, and ultimately behind the notion of “make joyful noise.”

A joyful noise is not merely noise for its own sake. Our world is filled with noise, much of it harmful or distracting. A joyful noise is a bold declaration of God’s glory and grace with shouts, clapping, and other outward expressions of praise. A joyful noise begins within a pure heart and radiates upward, finding expression in ways that honor God. As one theologian said, “When joy overflows, our actions reflect that joy.” Works for me! But I know for a fact that lots of folks are reluctant to sing loudly if at all. I get that. I can’t carry a tune in a bucket. But I sing anyway, and I’m glad that Heather has the good nature to put up with it! But whether or not we sing should have nothing to do with whether or not we can. But that said, why should we sing? Why should we sing openly, loudly, as if no one were listening? Here are just five of the many reasons we should all sing passionately in church this Sunday:

**First**, as you may have guessed, the Bible tells us so. As a matter of fact, there are over 250 passages where Scripture tells us to sing.

**Second**, singing together is a form of celebration, and why wouldn’t we want to celebrate all that God has done for us and our church? One church musician, John Bell, writes “God’s justice affects the fabric of this world and the integrity of its people. And somewhere in a church is song, which is sung in response to God’s commandment. God’s kingdom of justice has to be celebrated.” C.S. Lewis believed that singing completes our faith. In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, he writes, “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses, but completes the enjoyment, it is appointed consumption.”

The **third** reason to sing, is that singing is an expression of unity, a picture here on earth of the hope of heaven where every tribe, tongue, and nation will sing to God. When a whole church sings, it encourages the individual believer. John Calvin (of all people) wrote that singing is remarkable because “with one common voice, as it were with the same mouth, we all glorify God together.” Calvin writes, “we do this openly, that all men mutually, each one from his brother may receive the confession of faith and be invited and prompted by his example.”

**Fourth**, we are what we sing. It’s been shown that singing affects how we pray, think, and feel, influencing our memories and the deepest parts of our subconscious.

**Fifth**, and finally, singing (like giving) is a measure of our faith. Without singing, we cannot truly participate in the liturgy. Our baptism into the Body of Christ both entitles us and obliges us to participate in this worship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that “it is the voice of the church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing and you, as a member of the church, may share in its song. “Thus,” he says, “all singing that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian church on earth and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the church.”

Here’s the thing. As God’s people, broken, in need of healing and wholeness, people struggling to make sense of a chaotic world, we can with integrity and relief go with repentance and thanksgiving to the One who has created us, forgiven us and lives within us. Considering that, how in the world, then, can we NOT sing? I think that Robert Lowry said it very well, when he wrote “My life flows on in endless song. Above earth’s lamentation I hear the sweet, tho’ far-off hymn that hails a new creation. Thro’ all the tumult and the strife. I hear the music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul, how can I keep from singing? “What tho’ my joys and comforts die? The Lord my Savior liveth. “What tho’ the darkness gather round? Songs in the night He giveth. No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to that refuge clinging, since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth how can I keep from singing? I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin, I see the blue above it. And day by day this pathway smooths since first I learned to love it. The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing. All things are mine since I am His. How can I keep from singing? And King David after the debacle of his adultery with Bathsheba, it was he who turned to God and said “My tongue will sing of Your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord and my mouth will declare Your praise.”

So, how about it brothers and sisters? Let’s do this! Let’s sing! Let’s sing God’s praise. Let’s make a joyful noise to the Lord – one and all!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.