

Singing Our Faith

Psalm 150

Colossians 3:15-17

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

Perhaps the most influential reformed theologian of the 20th century—the most influential theologian that you’ve never heard of, Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian who helped shape the Biblical & theological response and resistance to the Nazis in the 1930’s, and was the greatest influence on the theology and practice of the Presbyterian Church, without people knowing it. Karl Barth wrote this, with regard to the church’s worship and ministry:

“The Christian church sings. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner necessity it sings. Singing is one of the highest forms of human expression. What we can and must say quite confidently is that the church which does not sing is not the church. And where it does not really sing but sighs and mumbles spasmodically (I love it that a prominent theologian uses the word “spasmodically”), and with an ill grace, it can be at best only a community which is

not sure of its cause and of whose ministry and witness there can be no great expectation. The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable forms of ministry in the church.”

And so, we sing! Even with masks on right now. Or in our hearts. Why do we sing? First and foremost, when we sing, God is glorified. When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and escaped the Egyptians, Moses led them in a song to the Lord, to thank and glorify God for their redemption. When the first temple was built in Jerusalem and they brought the ark of the covenant to rest inside, they sang and the glory of the Lord filled the Temple. On Passover night, Jesus and his disciples, as they finished their last meal together, sang a hymn of praise and then went out to the Mount of Olives. The book of Acts tells us that when Paul and Silas were in prison, what did they do? They sang; they praised God. Whether in celebration or in suffering, in isolation or community, in sweltering heat or frigid cold, God’s people have been found singing; singing their praise.

And by the way, this singing goes both directions. As we sing to God and lift our praise to God, the music is returned to us. Here is a great example of this: the prophet Zephaniah proclaims God’s redemption as like an exchange of music, as people and God both sing. Zephaniah 3:14-17 says,

“Sing, O Daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart. The Lord, your King is in your midst; never again will you fear any harm.... The Lord your God is with you, God is mighty to save; he will take great delight in you, he will renew you in his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

Did you hear that? God sings too! He sings over you. With rejoicing. And we, who are made in the image of God, sing. One of the most oft reiterated commands in the Old Testament is: sing! We just heard it in Zephaniah, yet it occurs mainly in Psalms. The Book of Psalms is the songbook (hymnbook) of the Hebrew people. There are psalms of joy and psalms of lament that express feelings with no pretense, with hearts laid open before God.

And there is our second reason to sing: to open our hearts to God. We sing, first, to glorify God, and second, we sing because music has the unique capacity to link our hearts and our minds. To connect our minds and hearts so we’re not just in our head all the time. Singing closes the gap of mind and heart, and more than that it allows us to *open* our hearts. Singing allows us to express our emotions, which is so needed—for us humans to give expression to our emotions, and thus open ourselves to God for healing and comfort and guidance. This is the “inner necessity” that Karl Barth is talking about.

This is why music is so important to adolescents. With the swirling emotions and tender growth, they need to be able to express themselves, and hear someone speak to their hearts. And I would make the case that we adults continue to need this as well. We can get kind of emotionally bottled up and buttoned up, and there's nothing like good music and singing to loosen us up and open us up and speak to our hearts, as we speak to God with our hearts.

This is why music is essential to the African American experience. Spirituals, blues, jazz, all helped, and still help, our black American sisters and brothers to process pain and trauma, receive comfort, hear from God, and express themselves to God with hearts open wide, nothing held back. And it helps them find a language, their voice in music, to speak it out and be spoken to. They tell their story through song, and their hearts heal through music and song, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul knew the power of song. He wrote to the churches about the essential practices of the faith in all his epistles. Included in those practices was singing. Not just theology or church order, or telling them to behave better. He wrote much the same instruction that we heard in the Colossians passage this morning to the church at Ephesus. He says: "Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to

one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Sing! he says.

So, we sing to glorify God; we sing to express our emotions and open our hearts to God. And while music glorifies God and connects our hearts and minds to God and opens us up, it also *shapes our faith and teaches us the faith*. This is a third reason we sing; or maybe we could call it a beneficial byproduct of singing.

John Calvin encouraged God’s people to “sing till we feel our hearts ascending with our tongues,” and then receive back from God the blessings of spiritual formation and learning.

To that end, a lot of our historic hymns and songs were used as teaching tools. If you read the text of many of the hymns that you requested (and I hope you do read them; and read the history and descriptions provided each week for you as well), you will quickly learn that several of these were composed as teaching tools. Because, we often learn better when we sing our faith! It’s why we always include music in teaching children. All Things Bright and Beautiful is a good example. Kids may not remember everything we say or teach, but they’ll remember the songs.

Btw, advertisers figured this out too, which is why they put a little jingle in your head that you can't get rid of. For example, "Oh I wish I was an _____" or "Give me a break, give me break, break me off a piece of that _____" or "Like a good neighbor _____" (Jesus is there... If you can't get the tune out of your head, you may as well re-write the words!)

Advertisers want to get a song stuck in your head so you'll remember their product. But God wants to get a song stuck in your head so you'll remember the One who truly meets your needs.

Music and singing is formational. In the context of our Christian faith, music teaches us, it inspires us, it can heal us, it comforts us—one of the things that was said about some of the hymns that were requested: it brought comfort.

This summer will be fun, and a blessing in worship. We will sing hymns and songs that you know and love and bring comfort. And we will sing hymns and songs that bring challenge—because they are new, or because the content of the hymn/song reflects Jesus' challenges to us in our discipleship. We need it all!

And, as Paul says, "Sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God." This is a wonderful, integrated approach to music and singing in worship. Use all kinds of music he says. Sing *psalms* (ancient chants); *hymns* (traditional; theologically

composed and poetically ordered); and *spiritual songs* (contemporary expressions; in the Bible that often meant extemporaneous, moved-by-the-Spirit songs). Paul says, sing them all!! This is the original integrated singing & worship experience!

Like the apostle Paul, the Psalm writers also advocate for diversity and integration in musical expressions of worship. Like we heard in the reading of Psalm 150. Just about every musical instrument David can think of is named in that psalm. And just because they hadn't been invented yet doesn't mean he wouldn't have included them in this list. Use them all in worship, he says. Praise God with harp and horn, lute and lyre, cymbals (loud ones!), pipes and bells, organ and piano, guitar, flute, fiddle. Marimba! All kinds of music is a blessing and can glorify God; so, let's hear it! Let's sing it!

So, as we sing a variety of songs this summer, there will be comfort and there will be challenge. With regard to the latter: when it happens that there is a song you don't like or it doesn't move you or bless you, then here is an invitation to each of us; here is something we can do: don't sing that song. There is no requirement to sing every song in the service every Sunday. So, don't harrumph about it (or "mumble spasmodically" as Karl Barth put it). Instead, take that time

to pray for the people for whom that particular song is meaningful and is helping them hear from God, and give their praise to God, and open their heart to God. Because, at another time in the service when we are singing a song you do like, or you are hearing from God or singing something that blesses you, others who may not like it will be praying for you. That's pretty cool, don't you think? That is what it means to be covenant people in worship together. That is how we serve one another here, and practice our service to serve others when we go forth to live our Monday through Saturday Christian lives.

This is going to be a fun summer! We need joy in our lives and we need to be people of joy, for the sake of others. So let's rejoice together, let's sing the faith, glorifying God with our voices, and with our lives as we go forth.