

Preached by Rev. JF Hudson at Pilgrim Church: 2/24/08
Scripture: Jeremiah 31:1-7, Ephesians 5:15-21

“The Music of Life”

From the text: ...be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

What makes sacred music, sacred? What is it about music as an art form that within it, somehow, some way, in just two or three notes played on a piano, or plucked out a guitar, or blown through a saxophone, or rung on a bell, or sung by a choir, that this created thing, this physical movement of man-made instruments or a voice against the air which then creates sound waves: how can this bring us to the very heart of God?

To try and answer such a question is almost a doomed enterprise, a bit arrogant, even silly. When Duke Ellington was once asked to define “good” music he declared, “If it sounds good, it is good!” Analyzing music is like trying to understand why a beautiful Da Vinci painting or an Emily Dickinson poem can move us to tears. Like trying to dissect love, like attempting to write out an equation as to why a gorgeous sunset or the touch of a loved one make our hearts beat a bit faster. Yet when music is sacred, is divine, is good, it somehow points us to God, it transports us up into heaven if but for a moment: then we know it. We feel the music in our bodies. We become the music and in that communion we experience God, we know God. And not just with our heads or our intellect or our brains but in a different place, a tender place, in our souls. If good preaching challenges the intellect and makes us really think, then good music makes us feel.

On this third Sunday of Lent as we once gain step back from our Christian rituals and pull back the curtain and consider just how and why we worship our God, I offer two thoughts on music. First: Thomas Carlyle once noted, “Music is well said to be the speech of angels; in fact, nothing among the utterances allowed to man is felt to be so divine. [For] It brings us near to the infinite.” Near to the infinite--maybe that is a good place to begin when thinking about sacred music. We enter into the infinite through its offering, in our worship, in life. Do you remember the precious times when music has brought you thus: near to the infinite?

I do...the first time I heard the opening notes of Aaron Copland's Appalachian Spring; or singing "Lord of the Dance" at high school church camp with 120 other enthusiastic teenagers; belting out "For All the Saints" at the funeral of my favorite seminary professor and having tears run down my face as I said goodbye to that old friend; sitting in this sanctuary just weeks ago and being washed over, redeemed by Duke Ellington's gorgeous piece, "Come Sunday".

In a way I cannot rationally understand nor quantify nor define when I sing in church; when I stand with others and share a hymn that makes me tear up; when the swell of the music from a majestic pipe organ vibrates in my very bones; when a soloist wraps her voice around a melody and makes me weep; when a children's choir innocently croons a song—in all of these ways we meet God, we bring a bit of heaven itself down to

earth. That's why Christians sing, why folks of faith sing, why humans sing. Music brings us nearer to the heart of God, to the infinite.

Second—at the most practical of levels, especially in Protestant Reformed worship music in our hymns: this is one ritual thing we all do together, as one body of Christ, as a choir, a community. Whether you're on key or off key, young or old, a long time worshipper or first time visitor. Here everybody, every body, sings!

I remember the first time one of my Roman Catholic relatives came to my church service, he observed afterwards, "Wow—you guys really sing all the verses, don't you?" Not every faith tradition sings and honors music like ours. I remember the summer of my sabbatical I went to Quaker worship several Sundays in a row. For one solid hour the congregation sits in total silence, save for the times when one person may stand up, moved by the Spirit, to testify. But: there was no music, no doxology, no choir, no hymns, no organ, no melodies. And that sparseness, it just left me bereft—I had to sing! So for me: no music—no God.

And at a time in our society when communal singing is pretty rare (do kids sing in school anymore or do adults gather around a piano at parties and sing?); when music is big business but is too often confined to the private earphones of an I-Pod, the act of hymn singing is an unusual act, counter-cultural even. Church is one of the last places in the world where folks actually sing together.

Music as ritual—bringing us near to the infinite and reminding us that when it comes to God, we are all in this together, singing: in sadness at a funeral, in joy on Easter morn, in the quiet of Christmas Eve, in the dependable ritual of hymn singing every Sunday.

So—thank God for our rituals of music: sung, heard, offered. May we as a body of Christ, keep on singing! Let all God's singers say, "Amen!"