

You Asked for It: Music Matters in Worship

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Colossians 3:12-17

[Sing Taize melody multiple times, until many join in singing too. *Sing praises, all you people, sing praises to the Lord. Sing praises, all you people, sing praises to the Lord!*]

The simple, almost chant-like melodies from the religious community of Taize in France, are intended to help individuals connect with the Divine by going within. Repetition frees the conscious mind from effort—after a few times, you don't have to “read” the music or pay attention to the lyrics. You can relax into the experience as the steady inhalation and exhalation of breath calms the heart and gradually fills the whole being. Our service of evening prayer on Wednesdays uses this music to encourage quiet meditation and prayerful reflection. The four minutes of silence in the middle of the service seemed like an eternity when we first initiated this worship style several years ago. I fidgeted; my restless mind jumped from one thing to another. But I'm learning: with practice I sometimes look forward to it, an oasis of peace in an otherwise full and frantic week.

There's something heavenly about music, something that makes it easier to see God, to feel Divine grace, to be inspired to courageous action, to know comfort and consolation. “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak” the playwright noted, and I've seen it; I've felt it within myself. So it has been since the beginning of time. Adam's children plucked stringed instruments, blew on reed pipes, and beat intricate rhythms on hollowed logs and stretched animal skins. Whenever the Bible talks about worship, music is mentioned prominently, and one of the primary ways the Israelites praised God was through song. Think about it: how many Bible verses do you know by heart? Does anyone remember profound thoughts or inspiring insights from sermons beyond Sunday afternoon? Fact is, music matters, because that's where we learn a lot about Christian theology and biblical faith. There's something heavenly about music: as Victor Hugo put it, “music expresses that which cannot be said, and about which it is impossible to be silent.”

It was hard to choose one text for today, because there are so many appropriate ones! From the Psalms: *Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Come into God's presence with singing...[Psalm 100]....* following the miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea: *Then the prophet Miriam took a tambourine and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: Sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously [Exodus 15:20, 21]....* A troubled King finds solace: *Whenever the evil spirit...came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it, and Saul would be relieved and feel better...[I Samuel 16:23] I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever [Psalm 89:1]....* Jesus and his disciples concluded the Last Supper by [*singing a*] hymn, and then going out to the Mount of Olives and the cross [*Matthew 26:30*].... to this vision of the end of human history: *Before the throne of God, day and night without ceasing, the faithful sing “holy, holy, holy, the Lord God*

the Almighty, who was to and is and is to come." [Revelation 4:8, alt] The Bible brims with references to music as a vital element of worship and personal spirituality. I chose a text from the apostle Paul's letter to the Colossian churches for a number of reasons. The first century church was new and young and just getting itself organized. The 21st century church is also in transition as it seeks to minister to new generations of techno-savvy post-moderns. In this passage, Paul explicitly names the making of music as part of the church's sacred responsibility. He actually exhorts the church to sing! And finally, the apostle offers guidance about how to harmonize, even when we disagree about the kind of music, the instruments we'll use, the tempo, and the style. Listen for God's word to the church in the reading from the letter to the Colossians, in the third chapter at the 12th verse.

[COLOSSIANS 3:12-17]

Ordination of gay and lesbian persons, abortion and reproductive choice, the Presbyterian Church's struggle for unity amid sharply divergent theological perspectives---my colleagues have been busy while I've been on vacation, preaching faithfully and fearlessly about all manner of controversial topics. It's a privilege to be in ministry with Dick and Missy, and if you were not able to be in worship the past three weeks, I encourage you to pick up copies of their thoughtful sermons. But I'm not sure that today's "you asked for it" topic stirs any less passionate debate. Several of you requested consideration of music matters in worship, ranging from how hymns are chosen (and by whom!), to expanding our congregation's repertoire to include more gospel and contemporary praise songs. More than one of you has raised an eyebrow (and some questions) about our New Vision contemporary service, the labyrinth, the summer Solstice service, and the upcoming "U2-charist" worship service, employing the indy rock rhythms and social justice lyrics of the group U2 and lead singer Bono. Anxiety runs high whenever "alternatives" to traditional worship styles are discussed. And perhaps you are among those who mourn the exclusion of "Onward Christian Soldiers" from the Presbyterian hymnal, or the lack of Christmas carols before Christmas Eve. Fairmount is by no means alone in struggling over music and worship styles. The phrase "worship wars" is increasingly used to describe congregational and denominational discussions about hymns versus praise choruses, and "contemporary" versus "traditional" worship.

It figures. Worship is the central act of a congregation; nothing we do---no program, no ministry, no outreach---is more representative of our identity and mission. In fact, the spiritual power and sense of purpose for everything else we do flow from our worshiping life. This puts a lot of pressure on the Sunday worship service. We want it to appeal to all age groups, to men and women, children and youth, introverts and extroverts. We want it to be a connecting experience---a time when worshipers feel closer to God and closer to each other. We want it to attract visitors. We want it to express the essence of our faith, as well as reflect the particular commitments of this congregation. We want to come away informed, inspired and engaged. And we want all this within 60 minutes. Is it any wonder that this is an area of tension??!

This morning let's step back for a moment and examine the reasons we worship the way we do, and the rationale for decisions about music to get a broader perspective. The Book of Order places responsibility for "rightly ordering divine worship and administration of the sacraments" into the hands of the Session. Decisions such as time and location of services, frequency of communion, and securing the services of a minister of music are made by this governing body.

In our church, the Worship Council oversees the particulars and makes recommendations to the Session about these matters. The Book of Order is explicit in allocating two powers exclusively to the minister: the selection of scripture texts and sermon content, and....the selection of hymns. While I always consult with our Minister of Music Bob Moncrief about hymns, and leave the choral anthems and instrumental music entirely to his discretion, I take this responsibility very seriously. I pour over the hymnal and try to choose ones that will strengthen and support the biblical text and theme of the sermon. But I'm also mindful of your preferences (and work with the list of "favorites" you named a few years ago). But, every "old favorite" was once a "new hymn" so I try to introduce new ones from time to time. The Presbyterian hymnal we use made concerted effort to include hymns from the African-American, Latino, Asian, and Native American cultures, and their inclusion only makes worship broader and richer....even though for most of us there will be a learning curve before we can sing with ease and gusto. Extensive research shows that people resonate most closely with music they sang while in their teens. When later generations come along and pick apart the theology or mock the quaint phrases or question assertions that have become discredited through modern sensibilities, their arguments aren't going to carry much weight. Much of our musical taste and preferences are not formed by reason or theological consideration, but by emotional, psychological and experiential associations we have with the music.

There's nothing wrong with that *per se*—and it's crucial to acknowledge it-- but we're not going to be able to end the worship wars if personal taste and preference, or any other secondary purpose, dominate our decision-making. If our primary criteria becomes "Will the congregation enjoy this?" or "Will this attract newcomers?" -then we will lose the central meaning of worship, and will misplace the true purpose of music within it. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly* urged the apostle to the nascent church. The purpose of worship is not entertainment or evangelism or even inspiration. In other words, it's not about you; it's not about me. It's about God. Does our worship glorify God? Does it point us to the Holy One, allow us to hear the word of Christ, and help us enter more deeply into relationship with God, the Creator, Ruler, and Savior of the universe?

When we get clear about that, then I think we can imagine a wider and broader spectrum of worship styles. The visioning exercises you participated in recently overwhelmingly affirmed traditional worship, with a biblical sermon, hymns, and classical music as one of the best aspects of our church. I frankly know few that do it any better. We will continue this standard of excellence in our eleven o'clock (or ten o'clock) Sunday morning service. But think about some people you know who don't attend worship. Perhaps your spouse. Your young adult children. The empty-nesters down the street. The lesbian couple on your block. The family with three teen-agers heavily involved in sports and school activities. Your administrative assistant. The people who just moved in next door. Might they benefit from worship that glorifies God and allows them to hear the word of Christ at a time and in a way they are most able? Our development and promotion of alternative services won't detract from Sunday morning; it will enlarge and augment our ability to glorify God out of the amazing diversity which is God's gift.

We don't know whether or not the early church fought about music. We do know that it was a community of human beings with strong convictions and varied perspectives. At least two of Paul's letters were prompted by divisions that threatened its unity. While the apostle was never

shy about declaring God's way, he always, always, counseled patience, kindness, forgiveness, love.

Worship is not a spectator sport, and to worship best means getting in the game. Our services invite you to participate: through congregational responses and affirmations, unison prayers, making an offering, passing the peace, listening to choral music and a sermon, partaking of bread and the cup--- and singing. Our vocal choirs and bell choirs are open to all, without audition, without evaluation of your musical skill or expertise. Sometimes people hesitate to sing in worship because they don't read music or think they can't carry a pitch. But maybe there's a reason the Bible says "Make a joyful NOISE to the Lord..." To praise God in song does not require a trained voice; only a willingness to try. God is the object of our worship, but paradoxically God is also the One who moves our spirits toward worship—and produces out of our imperfect efforts beauty, truth, goodness. So I encourage us all to take another step in worship and see what God will do through us. If you don't usually sing in church, try opening the hymnal and reading the words; or sing them on whatever pitch you find. God will be praised; and you'll get the additional benefit of oxygen intake which triggers endorphins and reduces facial wrinkles. It's true!

Finally, music and worship tune our hearts to receive (again and again, because there's no end to our need, nor God's generosity) God's grace. We express our gratitude by singing; but music also increases our awareness of God's gifts. We form words and music, and find our faith formed and spirits transformed through them. Music is love in search of a word, and perhaps that search constitutes the very best response to the One whose love for us and all people is boundless and eternal.

[singing] No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging. If love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?
How can we keep from singing? Amen.

The affirmation of faith today is the earliest summary of Christian faith, from early church writings. How else could we affirm this good news today—except through song? Please join in singing #____, rising as able.