

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
“When In Our Music God Is Glorified”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, April 26, 2020

Romans 15:5-13

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

*‘Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name’;*

and again he says,

*‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people’;
and again,*

*‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him’;*

and again Isaiah says,

*‘The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.’*

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Psalms 150

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise God in his mighty firmament!

Praise God for his mighty deeds;

praise God according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise God with trumpet sound; praise God with lute and harp!

Praise God with tambourine and dance; and with strings and pipe!

Praise God with clanging cymbals; with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

Will you pray with me? Holy God, we gathered this day to hear your word and we are reminded of the gift of music and song. So together, as we consider your word and hear the music this day that is offered to us, may we feel like we cannot keep from singing. Amen.

Indeed, this Sunday was to be Music Appreciation Sunday, so there'll be a lot of music to appreciate this morning, including some dueling duets, some piano, voice, and organ. We will not have the opportunity, at least this Sunday, to hear what was planned. Singing choirs of children and adults, the praise team, the bell choirs, all had been originally scheduled to lead worship. And I know we look forward to the time when we can gather once again in this building and hear the music in the flesh. And yet, there is still so much we can appreciate about the power of music and song on this Lord's day and to every Lord's day in its ability to transport us, soothing us, comforting us, uplifting us, and bringing us together. Indeed, music has long been a part of worship. The earliest church years, music was not unlike that found in the synagogues as many in Jerusalem were followers of Jesus that were Jewish. In this morning's reading from Romans, Paul celebrates the coming together of Jews and Gentiles encouraging them to sing praises to God.

We know from the Psalm that the lute, the harp, the drum, the cymbal, they were all part of ways of praising God. Early in his life, King David was a shepherd and a musician. And it came in time when he came to know Saul that he was one of the few that had the ability to soothe Saul in his times of depression and struggle, playing the harp and singing for him. King David was also known for dancing before the Lord and wrote a number of the Psalms used to praise and worship God. And a number of them open with "*sing to the Lord a new song*" or "*make a joyful noise unto the Lord*". The role of music in our tradition has shifted and changed over the years. The Cantor is still very much a part of worship today in the Jewish synagogue and found far back in Judaism. So the role of music in the church was also influenced by the role of music in the synagogue.

Over the years, Gregorian chants became part of worship services with music and responsive singing and still does. Worship included, particularly influenced by St. Benedict, songs and chants that were sung a number of times throughout the day and the night. And the organ came to be played literally in the 7th century, first used in pagan worship. The pagans had incorporated the organ into their celebrations. So in time, the Christians reframed it into their worship as well. Dates such as Easter and Christmas set by the church were done to overshadow the celebrations of the pagans, such as the winter solstice.

The Catholic church used music for the celebration of the mass, including singings of chants and familiar phrases but the Reformation brought changes. In Scotland, not only the music but the whole of the arts were impacted. Architecture both outside and within the church buildings changed including putting the pulpit in the center to represent centrality of the Word. And it was more austere. 1) "Song schools were closed down and choirs disbanded. Music books and manuscripts were considered frivolous and destroyed. Even organs were removed from the church." The organ and song groups were replaced in those churches by congregational singing of psalms because it was stated that anything sung in the church service had to come straight from scripture.

But other groups of the Reformation responded differently. Martin Luther was a former Catholic who kept the ritual of singing during the services and communion. And in time, the Methodist church came in to being. And John and Charles Wesley wrote numerous hymns. Isaac Watts, who wrote *Joy to the World* and other hymns, and other composers began to write music with the words that did not strictly adhere to scripture. They shared the faith story. Carols began to be included again, particularly in the 19th Century. And the spirituals that came into being in the time of slavery had a profound influence as well. Over the centuries, the organ returned to a more central role. And in recent decades, modern bands have been included as a means for praising God, and music is also geared to reflect the various seasons of the church year.

I, for one, am deeply grateful for the fullness of music here in this congregation. And I know many of you feel the same way. Our organ, Genevieve, is a wonderful instrument. And we have wonderful soloists who share their gifts of song with us. The large choir and praise band mean a great deal to those who enjoy their respective services. When the children sing it touches us. And members share with various

instruments, some they have not played since high school. The chance to sing hymns together in this building is so meaningful. And it's perhaps one of the things I miss most in this time apart.

While many of the psalms are of singing a joyful new song of praise and the many hymns are as well, we also know that music has a role in comforting us and conveying a sense of the holy in our lives. One of the members told me during his treatment for a serious illness that the gentle refrain of Come to Me, O Weary Traveler, that we sing during Lent, was a balm for him in the midst of a challenging time. He had felt so weary and was ministered to by the words of that hymn. When we gather for memorial services, the songs of the soloists speak to the time of loss and pain with promises of peace and hope. And when we have weddings here, there is no mistaking the organ's power in the processionals and the recessionals. Our building is also a place for musical talent from all over the area.

So while these are challenging times during this time apart, we have been offered and continue to be offered the gifts of music from our soloists and from Bill—and they are offerings. For whether it is the choir or the praise team, music shared in worship is not performance. It's an offering. Offerings that speak of faith, of wisdom, truth and glimpses into the holy, as well as a gift of comfort. In a world that has long been filled with lots of noise and expectation, time apart in music to sing, can offer a sense of peace, a time of stillness, and give us time to breathe and reflect.

We find, too, during these days, that musicians and singers of the world instinctively know to offer us music as a sense of connection and understanding. Many of us have seen the people of Italy singing from their balconies. We have the need to share music and they have the need to offer it, whether on Facebook, television, radio, Spotify, or our CD players, and for good reason. As many of you know, scientific studies show that music has a powerful effect on the brain. It can help to reduce feelings of pain, stress, and brain injuries and depression. Along with giving positive ways of supporting learning and memory. Consider all the nursery rhymes we can suddenly recite when a few words are sung. There are certain songs or musical pieces that bring memories flooding back. Emotions that range from joyful to melancholy. I know as a youth, and as my children grew, that music was and then is an important part of finding ones in a way and expressing emotions. I think that music is offering a bond to us all in times such as these as well. Often we are invited to sing with thanksgiving and joy, but there are also the songs that are offered and sung in times of lament. Whether in joy or in sorrow, music has the power to restore us and move us. Music in worship brings us closer to God, and to one another.

As one person observed, singing is one of the ways in which we express our love toward God. It opens our hearts and our minds to God in ways other things can't. It strengthens our worship both as individuals, and as a community. We are strengthened when we experience singing together in song because it is then that we really have the sense of being one in the body of Christ. ²⁾ “When we sing, something important happens within us. It brings us in touch with God, and with ourselves in powerful ways”. So as we remember and give thanks this day for the importance and power of the music that flows through us in this congregation, we give thanks to God and to those who share their gifts with us week in and week out.

So let us remember we are invited, even in the midst of difficult times, as the song said, *in the midst of tumult and strife*, we can still hear the music ringing. We are the people of God and the sheep of God's pasture. So now in the days to come, let us make a joyful noise unto the Lord in thanksgiving and praise for the gifts we have experienced in this place and the ways in which it brings us closer to God and to one another. Even in these challenging times we are invited to sing of the mighty power of God in thanks for the promises and love we are offered by God. So indeed, I ask, how can we keep from singing? Amen.

1. As written on [Wikipedia.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_music) website on Church Music.
2. *The 4 Purposes of Music in Worship* as posted on March 30, 2016 by Bishop Gregory O. Brewer from the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida.

