

East Liberty Presbyterian Church
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
January 30, 2011
Psalm 92
“Music of Heaven”

Today in worship we will take a moment to thank Craig Cannon, Don Wilkins, and Beth Minnigh, our interim music team, for their leadership this past year, even as we prepare next week to welcome Ed Moore, the new ELPC music director. In light of that, it is a good time to ask a simple question: Why do we sing in worship? What does music have to do with living a life that is faithful and righteous?

Back in ancient times, music was an integral part of all of life. It was important for military conquests, as armies went into battle; for mourning the loss of loved ones with funeral dirges; for merry-making and social occasions; and for magic rituals inciting the gods to grant one's wishes. Around 1000 BC, during the time of King David and the later temple of King Solomon, guilds of professional musicians developed and music was an important part of the religious life of the Jewish people, as was true for other people and other religions.

Five hundred years later, during the classic era of Greek civilization, music was directly linked to their gods, especially Apollo with his lyre and Dionysus with his reeds. It was believed music had the power to heal the body and purify the mind. Plato established academies in which young people studied sports for their physical well-being and music for their spiritual well-being. But it was the mathematician Pythagoras who discovered the connection between music and math, describing musical intervals, such as the octave, fifth or third, in terms of mathematical equations. Pythagoras insisted that all that is harmonious, good and beautiful in the world, whether in music or geometry or in the movements of the planets, was based upon the same mathematical relationships. The same laws held together all aspects of life. Singing beautiful music, therefore, made your body into an instrument that resonated with something literally in tune with the order of the world around you. And to go one step farther, Pythagoras believed that making harmonious music not only expressed something at the heart of all life, it also was a way to call forth new harmony and order out of the chaos and dissonance around us. Making music and harmony actually creates more harmony and beauty in the world.

So how did we get from Pythagoras to the Presbyterian hymnal? Most early religious music involved melodies sung by soloists and responses sung by the congregations. A synagogue soloist would sing a psalm and the Jewish congregation would sing a refrain. Years later a Byzantine priest would sing a canticle and the Christian congregation would sing Amen or Alleluia. Later still, a monk during the times of St. Benedict or Pope Gregory would sing chants during a mass and the congregation would sing the creeds they professed or ask forgiveness after a prayer of confession by singing “*Kyrie eleison*, Lord have mercy.” By the time of the 16th century Reformation and thereafter, it became common to write poems of faith and set them to music in

strophes or verses. These sung statements of faith became the hymns that make up the large, blue hymnals in the pew racks before you.

We honor a longstanding tradition every time we sing hymns in church. But there are other reasons for singing hymns. Singing is a physical act. When you sing hymns, you literally stand and use your body as an instrument to make music. It is participatory, in that you join with others to create something together. It is a type of profession of faith. Singing hymns involves publicly affirming what you believe. And as St. Augustine once said, “Those who sing, pray twice.” So instead of Sunday morning being one, long monologue by a single speaker, music turns worship into a conversation built around many voices. There is one other, critical reason why music in worship is so important, but first we need to turn our attention to the scripture readings for today and then reconsider dear ol’ Pythagoras.

On the surface, there doesn’t appear to be much in common between the moral instruction of Micah 6:8 (“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”), the comforting tone of the Beatitudes (“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”) and the more general words of Psalm 92. The Psalm talks about music and worship when it says, “It is good to sing praises to your name, O Lord by ... the music of the lute, the harp, and the melody of the lyre.” It professes that the Lord “made me glad [for] at the works of your hands I sing for joy.” This calls to mind a famous verse in Job 39, where it says that when God finished the work of creation, “the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 39:7).

Stars singing for joy – Make a joyful noise to the Lord (Psalm 100) – Let everything that breathes praise the Lord (Psalm 150) – These are all words combining music and praise. But those instructions never stand by themselves. Psalm 92 goes on to contrast the wise person with the dullard, the wicked who sprout like grass while the righteous flourish like palm trees and cedars. The Psalm insists that those who trust in the Lord will still produce fruit in old age; they will be ever green and full of sap (Ps. 92:14), but evildoers will be defeated and scattered like dust in the wind.

What’s the connection here? What’s the link between praising God with music and leading lives of righteousness and honor? The key is in Psalm 92:8: “You, O Lord, are on high forever.” Evil exists only for a season, but goodness and mercy are for all times. They are the foundation of life here and life to come. They come from God, who is eternal. This same God is the one with whom we are to walk humbly, for God’s ways alone lead to life in its fullest. This God is the one who guarantees the beatitudes – that the poor will inherit the kingdom of heaven, the meek will inherit the earth, and the peacemakers will be called children of God. This God is the foundation of all that is, the mathematician who has ordered all relationships, the Divine Composer and Musician whose ways are the true harmonies and source of beauty in life.

Before I pull all the pieces together, let's come at this from one other angle. Think about memorable times when you have sung a hymn or spiritual. Remember what it feels like to sing "Amazing Grace" at a funeral, "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve, or "We Shall Overcome" at an interracial service. For many of you, I would wager that something happens when you sing those hymns – a shiver goes down your spine, a stirring is felt in your soul. Why is that? Music has the ability to move us, yes, that's true; but this is more than that. To sing "Amazing Grace" at the time of a loved one's death is to literally entrust them to God's promised rest and to a love that saves us all. To sing "Silent Night" and lift candles into the dark of Christmas Eve is to shudder before the holy mystery of God descending to earth in the form of a child, Christ the Lord. To sing "We Shall Overcome" and to lock arms with one another is to proclaim that powers of racism and anger and fear will not have the final word in the drama of life; and though so many have fallen and been beaten down, we shall ever march onward for justice.

I think on some level, Pythagoras was right. Music involves not only harmonies within itself, but also resonates with the very harmonies and deep beauty of life itself. Music has much to teach us about how to live a life of righteousness and ethical behavior. How? Well, consider what is involved when you sing hymns in worship. You stand up. You breathe. You profess something; you participate in something. You join with others, standing on the foundations of the past and yet also creating something new that moves toward a common future. You feel the rhythm inside. You are moved and you sense it deep within. Those exact same qualities mark lives of active faith. You stand up. You breathe. You profess, participate, join with others, fight beside others in an orchestrated fashion. That's all part of the deep order of the universe and we sense it in our bones when we do justice, love kindness, and walk happily, humbly, musically with our Lord.

In the final analysis, faith and music, singing and ethics, loving service and worship share a common spiritual foundation. You feel its truth within you. You see it come alive around you. And yes, it can fill you with joy. Granted, in times of doubt and depression, you may not feel it strongly. But you can still sing "Amazing Grace." When you are alone or troubled, this may all seem like superficial religious talk, but you can still sing "Precious Lord, take my hand." Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we can still sense that we are standing upon a rock foundation, a deep foundation that resonates with the music of heaven and the ordering of the universe itself. This inner assurance of things unseen, this confidence of faith and comfort of faith, puts a song in our hearts.

That is why we sing in worship. That is why we stand and join our voices together: soprano, alto, tenor, bass; strong and soft, melodious and off-key monotones, young, old, saint and sinner alike. And that is also why we live lives of faith, ethics, and moral righteousness, for it involves the very same things. Caring for others as Christ did, loving others as the Lord has loved us, is as simple as singing the Lord's song and inviting someone else to join the chorus with you. It's just as the Psalmist says, "You, O Lord, have made me glad. For all your good works, I sing for joy." May it be ever so.

AMEN