

SERMON for May 21, 2006
Psalm 98

Rev. Shirley R. Funk
Lake Edge Lutheran Church
Madison, Wisconsin

Song Without Words

It was Methodist founder and hymn writer John Wesley who, more than three hundred years ago, penned the definitive on what and how to sing the songs of the church:

Sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can. Let not a slight degree of weakness or weariness hinder you. If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing.

Sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.

Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.

Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing God more than yourself, or any other creature. In order to do this attend strictly to the sense of what you sing, and see that your heart is not carried away with the sound, but offered to God continually; so shall your singing be such as the Lord will approve here, and reward you when he cometh in the clouds of heaven.

Well, that's fine, you say, if you have a good voice, if you can sing, if you like music. And to some extent, that is true. What if you don't? Then what is the place of song and music in the church, in the life of the congregation, in your faith? Entertainment? An addition? An extra that we could really do without? The answer, from theologians, from musicians, from faithful and seeking people of all denominations, all corners of the globe, all ages, to all those questions, is no. We need song – and I use that word to mean all music here – as much as we need to breathe. We need song to praise, to pray, to witness. On this wonderful Sunday here at Lake Edge, when we celebrate having a pipe organ for leading our congregational singing, when we celebrate the gifts of the choirs and the directors, when we celebrate with bells and guitars and drums, all instruments and the ones who play them, it seems appropriate to listen to various voices of the church through the ages on why we need song.

Sing to the Lord a new song... the psalmist speaks, over and over again, and speaks in the psalm for today, Psalm 98. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived his life and died in the dark shadow of Hitler's Germany, said, *Sing unto the Lord a new song...it is the Christ-hymn, new every morning, that the family fellowship strikes up at the beginning of the day, the hymn that is sung by the whole Church of God on earth and in heaven, and in which we are summoned to join. God has prepared for himself one great song of praise throughout eternity, and those who enter the community of God join in this song. It is the song that 'the morning stars sang together and all the children of God shouted for joy at the creation of the world'. It is the victory song of the children of Israel after passing through the Red Sea, the Magnificat of Mary after the annunciation, the song of Paul and Silas in the night of prison, the song of the singers on the sea of glass after their rescue, the 'song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb'. It is the new song of the heavenly fellowship.*

We need song to pray, to give voice to our deepest longings and our most unspeakable thoughts. All of us have been rendered speechless at certain times in our lives – when we hear our child’s first cry or our beloved’s last breath, when we are struck by the beauty and power of a storm, when our eye catches the fluttering of a butterfly wing, when the stench of rotting garbage and the crush of hordes of people overwhelm us in a nation or city or neighborhood of poverty. We can’t talk when we first receive good news, or bad. Joy or sorrow can both punch us in the stomach, taking away our breath and our capacity for speech. And so how do we pray when we have no words to express ourselves? In song. Not too long ago I watched, and actually re-watched, a movie, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. It is the story of three mixed-race, part-aboriginal girls, stolen from their mothers by dictate of the Australian government and taken to a camp to be trained as domestic workers. The spunky Molly leads her sister and cousin in a daring escape from the camp, and they head home, following the 1,000 mile fence that divides the continent, erected in 1907 to keep rabbits from invading and killing sheep in the western side of the country. At the beginning of the movie, the girls are stolen from their mothers and grandmother as they are walking near their home, thrown into a car and driven away. The horrified women run after the car carrying the sobbing children, but soon fall to the ground when they cannot keep up. The women do not scream, do not shout, do not say anything. Kneeling on the ground, they rock back and forth with a high-pitched, keening sound coming from the very depths of their souls. It is the prayer of the sorrowful. And it is an ageless prayer of rhythm and sound, from rocking a baby to clapping hands in joy to the steady beat of feet moving in a funeral procession. Song – with and without words – is how we pray.

Song is spiritual expression and spiritual exercise. Don Saliers is a professor of theology and music at Candler School of Theology of Emory University in Atlanta. His daughter, Emily Saliers, is a member of the folk-rock duo, *The Indigo Girls*. Together they have written a book *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live*, in which they explore the spiritual dimensions of music, both the Saturday night music of the *Indigo Girls* and the Sunday morning music of the church. They state, *Because everything in life can be touched in music, we think music could be conceived as a primary soul practice. It is in the very nature of music to awaken our souls to matters beyond the ordinary. Whether we are listening alone or together, the practices of music engage us at a very deep level...bring us to the animating center of life. This is why many call music the language of the soul made audible.* Song has the power to call us from a shallow spirituality to a deep relationship with God. This is what another theologian-musician, ST Kimbrough, says should be the criteria by which we choose what hymns and songs we sing in church. *Do the songs we sing summon us to a deepened spirituality in our journey with God in Christ, who calls the believing community to faithful discipline, worship and service? Do our songs celebrate and dramatize God’s story? Do our songs assist us in being absorbed by the gospel narrative? Do our songs witness to the perpetuity of God’s covenant and the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit?* What power has song, power to shape and strengthen and awaken our faith.

We need song to witness, to witness to a God of mercy and justice, a God of peace, a God of grace. Both Emily and Don Saliers speak of that power, Don with a performance of the late Robert Shaw performing Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* behind the Iron Curtain in East Berlin in 1988, and Emily singing with the *Indigo Girls*, again in Berlin, but this time while the Wall was falling. Church musician Martin Tel speaks of his parents growing up in the Netherlands, where the music of the Dutch Reformed Church was, almost exclusively, the Psalms, songs of comfort, praise, lament, confession, complaint. Growing up, he could not understand why his

parents loved that rather solemn music, until he visited the country of their birth. He writes, *In the early 1940's, the Netherlands was under Nazi occupation. My parents both grew up in the rural northern region of the country. The hardships of the war would mean that neither of them would acquire more than a primary school education. But what they received in their curtailed education is immeasurable. Every week, as part of their curriculum, they committed to memory a portion of the Dutch Psalter so that by the sixth year they could sing at least one verse of each of the 150 psalms. The Nazis forbade the singing of anything that smacked of Dutch nationalism or resistance to the occupation. Meanwhile, children were learning the psalms in grade school and singing them in the churches. The Nazis, keeping a close eye on these services in order to squelch any rising propaganda against the Reich, seemed to have been oblivious to the singing of the psalms, the songs of Zion. It would be too romantic to imagine that the Dutch Protestants consciously understood that they were taking up the songs of their voiceless Jewish sisters and brothers who had by now been hidden away or, more likely, sent off to their death. Nevertheless, when the Dutch had need for a repertory of song that would sustain them through occupation and subvert the enemy, they turned to the psalms of David, as in Psalm 68 , 'As wax is molten by fire, so shall the wicked perish'. Both then and now, these psalms provided a hope and joy framed by reality...Opening ourselves to the suffering of the world would not only allow us to give authentic voice to our songs of lament but would also give more authenticity to our songs of praise.*

We need song to praise. Church Reformer Martin Luther considered music to be an endowment and a gift of God and, *next to theology*, offered music the highest praise. And his contemporary in the seventeenth century, John Calvin, was concerned that worship not only be an exercise of the mind but that the heart must also be engaged. He proclaimed that song has *great force and vigor to arouse and inflame people's hearts to invoke and praise God with a more vehement and ardent zeal*. Contemporary hymn writer Brian Wren eloquently summarizes,

*Then let us reach for excellence to sing and symphonize
for God, our utmost audience, with joy our highest prize.
When kindly skill our spirit lifts and makes the humble strong,
give thanks, and praise the graceful gifts that lead the people's song.*

*God, give us music to express and richly interweave
our yearning with our thankfulness, and sing what we believe,
till, glorious in the realms of grace, with new creation's throng,
our Savior meets us face to face and leads the people's song.*

Song with words – song without words. Our faith requires a song. Amen.