



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
OUT OF THE MINDS OF CHILDREN: QUESTIONS OF FAITH

Why Do We Have Music?
Why Do We Have to Sing?
Psalm 150; Colossians 3:12-17

I have discovered that the jokes musicians tell about music are both clever and corny. For instance, Do you know why Mozart killed his chickens? Because they ran around screaming “Bach! Bach! Bach!” Do you know how to fix a broken tuba? With a tuba glue! Of course, you should always remember the wise musician’s safety advice: “C-sharp when you cross the street . . . or you’re going to B-flat.

Children have the best music humor, though. Music educators in Missouri collected the following comments made by music students:¹

I can't reach the brakes on this piano!

Just about any animal skin can be stretched over a frame to make a pleasant sound once the animal is removed.

Beethoven wrote music even though he was deaf. He was so deaf he wrote loud music. He took long walks in the forest even when everyone was calling him.

Handel was half German, half Italian, and half English. He was rather large.

A virtuoso is a musician with real high morals.

I have an old 1956 *Baptist Hymnal* that I found in a storage room in the church I served in Savannah. Children (I think!) had discovered that the blank pages at the back of the hymnal could be used as a notepad. Carefully scripted in the book was the following conversation:

¹*Missouri School Music Newsletter* (ca. 1990), quoted at Music Simply Music: A Sound Approach to Music Education website, Music Humor page; available online at: <http://www.musicssimplymusic.com/musicumor.htm>.

“Anybody reading this—I’m sorry for ya!”
“Mom’s giving us the eye!”
“She’ll fall asleep soon! No need to worry.”

One of my favorites jokes, however, is one told by Gene Perret who was Bob Hope’s head comedy writer. He said, “An incurable music lover is someone who will buy a set of drums for their own kid.”²

Children love music—even when what they love all of us may not call “music.” Music is part of a child’s life. We sing or play lullabies for babies almost from day one. Children are entertained by music. They learn from music. Although our granddaughter really has no rhythm whatsoever at this point, she loves to bounce along with whatever the beat is. Children love music. That is why I expected at least one of our children to ask me a question about music at church. I was not disappointed. I got two questions.

Gilliam Parker asked a philosophical question: “Why do we have music?” Will Robillard, a rather practical young man, asked, “Why do we have to sing?” Both are good questions. In the context of our faith, how can we answer them? What does our faith have to say about music?

Our world is permeated with music. We have radios, CD players, and televisions with hundreds of music channels available. Cars with satellite radio can access music from around the globe in any genre available. We carry music with us on our phones and, except for old timers like myself, most people choose a tune for their ring tone. I always smile when “Ode to Joy” means someone special is calling. Music is everywhere, but why do we have music?

Thomas Troeger, musician, composer, teacher, and preacher, reminds us that music began in the beginning. You remember the story from Genesis which imagines creation beginning when God breathed over the primordial waters. What happens when wind moves over water? Music. We have all been at the coast and heard the music wind makes as it strums the water. It may hum or whistle or roar. We hear the waves crescendo on the beach or fall gently onto the shore with light slapping sounds. The music of wind and

²Gene Perret with Terry Perret Martin, *Classic One-Liners* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1994), 37.

water can be loud or soft, dramatic or subtle, frightening or soothing. From the beginning, God breathed life and made music.³

The gift of music was not confined to nature. It is a gift that God gave to you and to me when God shaped humanity. Like a musician preparing to play, God touched his lips to the human form. Controlled breath moved from Creator to Creature and, just as an instrument comes to life when the reed is vibrated, so the human came to life and God's finest instrument was born. When God breathed life into humanity, God breathed music.

I want you to do something. Hum for a moment. What do you hear? A note, a tone, a pitch. You are a woodwind instrument that produces twelve million notes a year with every breath. Now find your pulse at your wrist or your neck. What do you feel? Your pulse is a steady beat that reverberates throughout your body forty million times a year. You are a percussion instrument. When you sing, air moves over your vocal chords, causing them to vibrate, so you are also a stringed instrument. As Troeger says, "From the moment of your birth you are an orchestra playing a perpetual concert through every moment of your life."⁴

We have music because it is in our spiritual, if not in our biological, DNA. We are musical creatures because God created us this way. Most creatures have the means of making music. Go outside on a still night and listen to the lullaby of sounds nature makes. Or get up early and listen to the concert of birds greeting the morning. Ours is a musical world. No wonder the psalmist called on all creation to make music to God:

Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Psalm 150:3-6

³Thomas H. Troeger, *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 86-87.

⁴Troeger, 79.

Thomas Troeger has written many hymns. Listen to the following words which help us imagine how our bodies and spirits harmonize with the world to praise God with song:

First find a steady beat.
Your pulsing heart will do.
Mark how the sounds repeat, repeat—
a drum that drums in you.
Then whistle, sing or hum
melodic flowing lines.
You are a woodwind and a drum
whose music intertwines.

Next harmonize with birds,
with ocean, wind and shore,
whose hymns and anthems use no words
but waves that beat and roar.
Now cross beyond the sea
where songs unlike your own
reveal the world's diversity
in rhythm, mode and tone.

Through all the varied songs
earth's many voices raise
hear how the whole creation longs
to sing the artist's praise
who tunes the world for sound
and sets our hearts to beat,
and with a music more profound
makes all our songs complete.⁵

We have music because it is a gift from God. It unites us with all of creation and enables us to communicate what we experience and feel in ways that words alone cannot accomplish. We have music because we are musical creatures.

If we are ourselves musical instruments, then our purpose is to make music. As we have seen, in some way we do that simply by being alive. But there is always more. Music communicates. What is that we have to say?

⁵Thomas H. Troeger, *God, You Made All Things for Singing: Hymn Texts, Anthems and Poems for a New Millennium*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 3, a cited in Troeger, *Wonder Reborn*, 93.

What do we need to share? What is important to us? By singing, we tell one another what is important to us. We affirm what we believe. We express our love for God. We share our message with the world.

The songs collected into the Book of Psalms were used by Israel in worship. They comprise the one book in the Bible in which we humans speak to God. They are prayers put to music, the deepest longings of the human soul reaching out to God. That is why they are among our favorite passages of scripture and why so many composers have created new music to share them with the world.

The primary reason we sing is to praise God. As we considered last week, the most important thing we do as Christians is worship God. We offer our thanksgiving and sing praise for all that God does for us and the world. In our singing, we bear witness to the light of God's love which shatters the darkness that encroaches on life.

Sometimes our singing helps us to find the answers we are seeking. Last spring, a friend of mine was mulling over the recent shooting of a Black man by a White officer in North Charleston, South Carolina and the rising racial tension in our nation. He was struggling with how to pray in that situation. He wrote:

Driving to church on Sunday morning, on the second Sunday of Easter, I had a recurring question. In the news and on my heart were Walter Scott, Michael Slager, and the people of North Charleston. Though I did not have the responsibility for leading any of the prayers in worship that day, I could not help but ask, "If we were to be praying for these people, their families, and this city, what would be our prayer?" The pain and sorrow of loss of a husband and father; the agony of a family whose loved one is charged with murder; more division among people of different races; more signs of injustice; and so many unanswered questions.

There is so much for which to pray. Including all in such a prayer would be challenging, if not threatening to others. However, each, and all, should be recipients of any prayer-filled words we might offer.

During worship we sang the hymn “Christ is Alive” by Brian Wren. When singing the third verse my question about what prayer we would pray was answered.

*In every insult, rift, and war,
where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more,
and lives, where even hope has died.*

These words of resurrection faith penned by Brian Wren speak with and for the people, all the people of North Charleston. These words we sang became the prayer we offered.⁶

It is often in the words of faith set to music that we find the answers we are seeking. Our prayers which have no words, suddenly find flight in music. Our hearts which are burdened, become freed because we are reminded that we are not alone, that “Christ . . . lives, even where hope has died.”

We sing because we seek understanding for our faith. We are looking for answers, trying to find our way through the maze that life sometimes becomes. And, when we do find that path that is broad and clear and welcoming, we cannot help but invite others to share it with us. We have to sing because we must. We sing to encourage one another. As the Apostle Paul urged his friends in Colossae,

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Earlier in our worship, we sang one of my favorite hymns. Written by Robert Lowry, a native of Philadelphia, in 1869, one cannot help but believe the trauma and upheaval of the recent Civil War shaped his thoughts as he put pen to paper.

⁶C. Franklin Granger, “What Would Be Our Prayer?”, April 13, 2015, Blog at Wordpress.com; available online at: <https://morethanpeddlers.wordpress.com/2015/04/13/what-would-be-our-prayer/>

My life flows on in endless song; above earth's lamentation,
I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth how can I keep from singing?⁷

As people of faith, we have a story to tell. We have a message to share. God in Christ has come to us to reveal God's great love for all of humanity and to open the door of hope for us all. How can we not share that good news? How can we keep from singing?

A few years after Robert Lowry wrote his hymn, Philip Bliss shared his faith in song. Another familiar hymn, it is an invitation to us all to share the Good News.

Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life,
Let me more of their beauty see, wonderful words of life;
Words of life and beauty teach me faith and duty.
Beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.⁸

Why do we have music? Because God created us with music. We are God's musical instruments meant to enliven the world with song. Why do we have to sing? Because we have a story to tell. We have a song to sing. We have a message of love and hope that all of the world needs to hear. Music is not a joke, but it does bring us happiness, especially when the song is about God's love for us. Whether by music or song, by word, or by compassionate acts, the Good News must be shared. How can we keep from singing?

⁷Robert Lowry, "My Life Flows On," 1869, *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995); 619.

⁸Philip P. Bliss, "Wonderful Words of Life," 1874, *Chalice Hymnal*, 323.

August 16, 2015

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Thoughtful and heartfelt music has captured the mood of our spirits, O God, but now we want you to listen to our words and our hearts. The week past has reminded us many times over of our dependence upon you and of your continual presence with us. We are thankful that you have led where we have gone and surprised us many times over when we have turned and found you waiting for our return. Thank you for your faithfulness with us and for the blessings we have discovered simply by looking for you in unusual places.

Now we ask for your grace for today and the days ahead. As we move back and forth, seeking rest and adventure, looking for fun and hoping for renewal, we ask you to guide us and walk with us. Bless our times of refreshment that we may rest our spirits as well as our bodies. Bless our times of enrichment that we might stretch our minds and thus enlarge our hearts. Bless our moments of fellowship and our occasions for solitude that we might learn to listen to ourselves as well as to one another.

Even as we enjoy these last days of summer refreshment, we do not forget our brothers and sisters who live in other lands or different neighborhoods or whose lives are vastly different from our own. We pray for them, especially those whose lives are punctuated with violence, fear, and uncertainty. Bring an end to the culture of death and refresh our world with a spirit of peace, we pray.

We continue to remember all public servants who are placing their lives on the line for the sake of others. We ask for their safekeeping and pray for their families who yearn for them to return home. We pray for everyone who is gripped by grief and whose looking for the return of a loved one has become simply a vain hope. Bring comfort and security to families and justice to our world.

Bless our congregation, O God, as we prepare to move into a new season. Continue to enrich our ministries and to guide our efforts to make you known in this place. Help our worship, whether here or in other sanctuaries of your good world, to be helpful and uplifting. Energize us to delve into new ventures, eager to resume uncompleted journeys, excited about the possibilities that await us in this place.

O God, well up within us that delight of life that will find the good in all things and the best in whatever seems wrong. Resurrect within us the zest for living that comes with being reborn in the spirit of Christ. For it is in his name and for his sake that we offer our prayers. Amen.