

SENT OUT SINGING

Text: Ephesians 5:15-20

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This illustration from Michael Lindvall really “resonates” with me. (Pun intended.) He writes. “I remember joking to our choir director back in Ann Arbor that when I stood in front of the choir singing a hymn, I sang a whole lot better than I could alone. I’m not much of a singer, and what I meant was that because of all those superb voices behind me, I just sounded better. She corrected me. “No, when you’re surrounded by strong singers, you actually do sing better yourself. You don’t just sound better; you are better.”

It’s not just about singing. We “do better” in community. We were created to be in relationship. It’s how our full humanity is formed. Sin disconnects us from God, each other, the creation and ourselves. Worship works to put together those relationships. We follow Jesus not as isolated individuals but in that community we call “church”. We are “better”. We make the world and those around us “better” as well.

Today we’re are remixing the lectionary—at least the series of “worship with Rejoicing” we have been working with these past few weeks. Next week we will talk about benediction. But that really isn’t the end of the service for us, is it? We send by “being sent out in song.” Often “Surely the Presence” is used to open a service, but we hum it right out the doors. I give thanks for those who lead and “make music” for us. We think also of the place music has in our faith, our worship and our lives. In many ways music is “**faith’s voice**”.

Many places in the Bible speak of the importance of praising and giving thanks to God. Music is a big piece of that. Today’s text speaks to that truth. Paul is writing to the church in Ephesus. “**Instead, be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.**”

The music we sing or play in worship expresses our faith; it’s a way to “teach and admonish one another” as Paul instructs in another Epistle. Speaking to each other with psalms and songs will fill us up with the Spirit and goodness instead of “evil and debauchery”. It reaffirms and tells others what we believe. Pastors pay so much attention to the texts of hymns and songs. It’s not just does it “sound good” or “sing good”. It’s also does it “**say**

good". What we preach and teach is reinforced by our singing and our music. When the two are at odds the message others hear gets confused. You might call it a matter of "*sound theology*". (Pun intended.)

Music in worship isn't a performance. It's a form of ministry; a gift offered to God. Whether we sing in a choir or group, in the pew (or the pulpit) or whether we play an instrument; our purpose is to praise and glorify God. It's meant to enhance the worship experience helping all who hear and participate to be blessed.

Dr. Leonard Sweet writes: *The kind of songs our souls sing affects our world and affects our health. There's healing power in music. The original meaning of the Latin word cantare from which we get our English word "to sing" meant "to work magic" or "to heal". A cantor was someone who worked magic with sounds or music. A "cantata" was a healing piece of music. Many times it still is!*

Dr. Walter Brueggemann is a biblical scholar. He says praise is our "*duty and delight*"; it's "*our vocation*". We respond to God's faithfulness and love with praise, gratitude and worship. Dr. Brueggemann also believes that such praise is a means of social transformation. A faithfully worshipping community can change and reshape the world. How? By reminding us of God's goodness and grace and also of God's desire for justice, mercy and peace. We hear of God's vision for the world. We're challenged to live in ways that make real what we've said and sung.

Our worship, praise and music thus become dangerous acts. They describe the world as God wants it to be; to claim that vision and to change those things which run counter to it.

Life can be harder than we ever imagined. Sometimes it's a struggle; sometimes it's more like a battle. We need "*fight songs*" It gives us comfort and courage. It reinforces what we know. Our singing together helps create community. Our songs lead us and others into a closer relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Our music can come from that tradition we know as "*sacred*" or from a newer and more "*secular*" one reflective of our life in the world. It doesn't matter whether it's classical, country or contemporary. It can be a folk song or a fugue. We can rock or we can rap. We can play blues, baroque, jazz or simply make a joyful noise. Music has power. It gives voice to our deepest feelings and ignites our imagination. It renews and lifts us from despair. It calls us to see beyond what we now experience.

One teen-aged girl puts it this way. She's describing her life in the Prince George Hotel in New York City. It's been turned into a homeless

shelter. She lives there with her mother. She says: *The hotel has the devil all through the place. So you have to sing something different than the music others are listening to. I like to sing gospel at the shows they have in the old ballroom. The people really listen—like they are hearing something more in the music. I feel God singing through me. It makes me feel better because I'm singing for the Lord...I know somehow, I know some way we're gonna make it. Things are gonna work out all right with Jesus on our side.*

We need that reassurance. It keeps us going. It helps us endure. It renews our faith and gives us hope. What we sing and hear helps us remember. We're told again of God's faithfulness. We rehearse what God has done and are newly assured of what God will yet do.

Pastor Jim Harnish writes of how he heard "**faith's voice**". It was shortly after his father's death. He describes it this way. *"That spring I heard Beethoven's Mass in C for the first time. Beethoven's setting of the Nicene Creed blew my mind. I've never gotten over it. I'm convinced that when the angel choirs in heaven affirm the creed, they sing it the way Beethoven set it to music. In English, the modern version of that creed ends with: "we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."*

In Latin, the words are "et expecto" (we expect) Beethoven has the choir repeat the phrase "et expecto" louder and stronger each time, reinforcing that we don't merely "look for it"; we expect it!

Music witnesses to our faith. It helps us face the struggles of life. It can also enable us to face death, not with fear but with hope. It reminds us that our "expectations" aren't in vain. Music at memorial services (yes, even jazz, big band and dance music) is a defiant and bold witness to our conviction that death isn't our end. We sing the promises of God. **Our trust is that God will keep them.**

Pastor Scott Johnston shares an e-mail he got from his friend Matthew Davis. Matthew is the pastor of Lamington Presbyterian Church in New Jersey. He got a call from a local nursing home. A resident was dying and her twin sister wanted a pastor to come and say a prayer.

Finding the twin's room Matthew met two women in their nineties. The sister who called was Dr. Francis Craig. Her dying sister was Dr. Eleanor Craig. Both of the women had obtained doctorates in music studying under Virgil Fox, a premier organist of his day. In their own careers, in a time when many believed women couldn't be organists, these two distinguished musicians played recitals at Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame and Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church.

"It was amazing", Matthew wrote "to see Francis come to life as she spoke of days gone past. I was taken by her story but deeply saddened to

see that such accomplished musicians had no CD or tape player let alone an iPod to comfort them. So I went to a nearby store and picked up a collection of Bach organ pieces played by their teacher and then returned to the sisters. I cranked up the volume on a CD player so that everyone in the nursing home could hear—with or without hearing devices. As the music swelled, Francis' hands, which are quite clenched straightened as she played along with her former teacher. We played sister Eleanor into that great mystery."

Playing Bach in a nursing home is a defiant act. It reminds us of the ground and source of our hope. We praise the God who in Jesus Christ gives us something to sing about in this life and the next.

Praise is our "duty and delight". We sing what we believe. We remember and we rejoice. When we can't find the words, we "hum" through our tears. If we can't "carry a tune in a bucket", we make a "joyful noise".

I have one more example of "Faith's voice"; this time, coming from Rev. Dr. Faith Conklin, my mother. A few months ago, she was asked to speak at the memorial of our dear friends and former Choir Director. She writes... *"Karl tried his best to further my music education. When you're a classically trained talented musician and teacher, what do you do with a pastor who's music of choice is Country, who can't carry a note but loves to sing loudly and needs as Karl put it, "her hands tied behind her back" so she won't clap to the beat? As he described me once at a Choir Banquet: "As a singer you make a wonderful dancer."*

One memory stands out for me over the years. Despite my musical shortcomings, not being able to sing, read music or play an instrument, I told Karl one day that I always wanted to direct a Choir. I thought it would be especially wonderful to direct the Hallelujah Chorus. My last year at Whittier, he gave me the chance. One Sunday morning, he stood me in front of the Choir and handed me his baton. Then he stepped back behind me. The Choir turned toward me expectantly. Tom, our organist looked right at me. There was dead silence. Nothing happened. Finally, Karl whispered. "You're the director. They're waiting for you to start. You have to give them a signal." I waved the baton, they started singing. I went on waving. All the while Karl stood silently behind me doing it properly and smiling at us all.

With "faith's voice" and with gratitude in our hearts let us "sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God" now and always. Amen.