

**A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on April 25, 2021.**

### **THE WESLEYS: SINGING THE FAITH**

***Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Psalm 100:1-2***

There are times that my ad-lib attempts at humor can get me in trouble. Several years ago, at the end of a funeral, I introduced the last hymn by asking everyone to stand and sing, even the Roman Catholics. I was attempting to have a small joke with the son in law of the deceased who was Roman Catholic. Since the member who died had been a member of our choir, we had talked about how important singing was in Protestant Churches.

Unfortunately, also in attendance at that service was our Town Supervisor. He has not let me forget my faux pas. I have been fined several times at Rotary. A couple of years ago we had some difficulty getting the Pavilion at the Town Park for our picnic. Pat was helpful in getting the problem solved. He called me to say, "You have permission to have your service at the park with one condition. You can only sing two verses of any hymn."

These light-hearted exchanges reflect some real differences between Roman and Protestant worship. In March of last year, almost half the members of a large choir in the State of Washington became sick after a two-hour choir rehearsal. Since that time, we have lived with singing being restricted. The restrictions on singing during the Covid pandemic have been much harder for Protestants than for Roman Catholics. Hymns do not play the same role in Roman worship. Hymns serve largely as traveling music. It serves to cover the movement of people during the service. The congregation often do not even open hymnals to join. Thus, Roman Catholic worship during Covid does not seem to be all that different than in normal times.

But for Protestants, hymns serve a much more important function. The singing of hymns both teaches us about God and leads us into contact with God. Our Luminaries for today are two brothers who helped make the singing of hymns into a sacrament; not an official sacrament, but still a means of grace.

John and Charles Wesley were born into a family of eighteen. Their father was an Anglican Priest and poet. Their mother, Susannah, was an educated woman who spent six hours each day teaching her children Greek, Latin and French. The boys were sent to prep-school and then both went to Oxford. While at Oxford they began to take their Christian faith more seriously. Charles formed the Holy Club, and with two or three others celebrated Communion weekly and observed a strict regimen of spiritual study. Because of the group's religious regimen, which later included early rising, Bible study, and prison ministry, members were called "Methodists." John later joined his younger brother in the club and became its leader.

Following their Oxford experience, now ordained, the brothers traveled to America to do mission work in Georgia. They both had less than positive experiences. On their return to England both brothers had profound spiritual experiences, just days apart, that deepened their faith. John describes his experience on May 24, 1738 in these words:

**"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."**

Following the deepening of the faith, the brothers were invited to join another member of their Oxford society in his work among working people. George Whitefield was having remarkable success as a preacher, especially in the industrial city of Bristol. Hundreds of working-class poor, oppressed by industrializing England and neglected by the church, were experiencing emotional conversions under his fiery preaching. So many were responding that Whitefield desperately needed help.

So, both brothers began preaching around England in the open air to people who lived and work in cities being developed in the early industrial age. John and Charles were alike in many ways but there were differences in temperament and experiences. The younger brother Charles had a creative and poetic side. After about ten years of traveling, less than robust health and a very happy marriage, meant he stayed home to preach in Methodist chapels first in Bristol and then London.

Charles passion was hymn writing. He was said to have averaged 10 poetic lines a day for 50 years. He wrote 8,989 hymns, 10 times the volume composed by the only other candidate (Isaac Watts) who could conceivably claim to be the world's greatest hymn writer. He composed some of the most memorable and lasting hymns of the church: "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "And Can It Be," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," "Soldiers of Christ, Arise," and "Rejoice! the Lord Is King!"

John had different gifts. He had a very difficult marriage, so being on the road preaching was not a burden for him. He had a gift for organization and preaching. The Methodist movement at first was understood as a reform movement in the established Anglican church. Many of its followers would go to a Methodist meeting before the regular liturgy in the parish church. These meetings would largely consist of preaching and singing hymns.

John Wesley being a man of organization wrote rules for singing hymns. In 1761 he wrote seven rules for singing. I would like to share with you four of John Wesley's Directions for Singing.

First of all, Wesley says,

**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.**

Wesley encourages everyone to sing. Even if you feel you have a bad voice or you do not like to sing, he tells you to try.

The second rule of Wesley I would share says and I quote:

**Sing lustily and with 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 sung the songs of Satan.**

Almost every time a church service is portrayed in the movies the people are bleating out hymns like half-dead sheep. In one of the churches I served there was for a time an organist who played slowly and without energy. During an event sponsored by the town historical society, one of the members of the church said, "Greg some Sunday I am going to walk down the center aisle and lay on the communion table." I replied, "Ethel why would you want to lie on the communion table." She responded, "Because if all we are going to have are funeral dirges, we need a body."

The words in our hymns are about the joy, forgiveness and the love of Christ. We should sing with energy, power and joy.

Wesley's third rule tells us:

**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.**

The singing of hymns together is not a solo performance. We are not to sing as loud as possible in order to hear our distinctive voice. We are to seek to blend our voices with each other. The singing of hymns is to be a time when the unity of the congregation is most pronounced. We are to become one in the harmony of music.

The final rule in Wesley's Direction for Singing tells us:

**Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him 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.**

Singing hymns is a spiritual act. We are not singing for ourselves or for the person standing next to us. The audience is God. It is to the Risen Christ that we sing our praises. The words are important. Wesley says not to just be carried away by the melody. He tells us to pay attention to the words that express our faith.

Now you may wonder why I am making such a big deal about the singing of hymns. The reason is that music has great power.

Plato believed that music is able to touch the emotional, non-rational parts of human beings. Music is able to speak to the inner core of our souls and connects with our primal being. Music has power because it is able to speak to the deepest needs of the human soul.

The Psalmist tells us **Come into his presence with singing!** The Psalmist knew that it is music that can lead us into God's very presence. The most beloved section of the Old Testament is the Psalms. We should remember that the Psalms were written as hymns. The Psalms are meant to be sung; they were the hymnbook of Israel.

St. Augustine said, "When you sing, you pray twice" I believe that participating in the singing of hymns can be of great importance to every worshipper. Music has great power. It speaks both to and from the very depths of our being.

Singing helps express our joy.

Singing helps us to endure the heartbreaks of life.

Singing can help us understand God's love.

Singing can restore our relationship with God

Yes, the singing of hymns has the power to become a pathway into the very heart of God. This sermon's focus on the Wesleys was planned about a year ago when we all thought we would be back to normal. The fact that we still do not know when we will be able to stand and sing out reminds us of just how important singing is to our spiritual well-being. Worship will not feel whole until we can fully follow the words of the Psalmist:

***Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!***