

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on July 4, 2021.

THE SOUNDS OF WORSHIP

O Come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Psalm 95:1

If there is one thing that our experience of Covid restrictions has taught us it is the importance of the sounds of worship. It is almost impossible for Reformed Christians to fully encounter God without music. Music plays so many important roles that help to deepen our encounter with the divine.

This morning we continue our summer focus on worship. The purpose of this series is to seek to learn from our Covid experiences. We can use our experiences to reform our liturgy in meaningful ways. I invite your feedback all through the summer. In August the Worship Committee will meet in order to reform our liturgy for the Fall.

Today we will focus on the role that music plays in our worship. In our text for this morning the Psalmist tells us **O Come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!** In these words, we are reminded of many of the functions of the sounds of worship.

One of the basic functions of music, both instrumental and choral, is to facilitate movement in worship. Some of you might remember the Jackie Gleason variety show. If my memory serves me right, Gleason would come to welcome the audience and then he would turn to his band leader and say, "Sammy, a little traveling music," and then he would say, "Away we go." There are many times music plays the role of traveling music in worship.

Can you imagine how deadly it would seem if the leaders of worship walked down the central aisle in dead silence. What would taking up the offering be like if all you heard was the clanking of plates and the heels of the ushers. Do not underestimate the times that music helps people move from point A to point B during worship. Music provides pleasant segues connecting different elements of worship.

A second purpose of music is to educate the people of God. There is a wonderful quote from St. Basil in the fourth century, he says:

For when the Holy Spirit saw that humankind was ill-inclined toward virtue and that we were heedless of the righteous life because of our inclination to pleasure, what did he do? He blended the delight of melody with doctrine in order that, through the pleasantness and softness of the sound, we might unawares receive what was useful in the words according to the practice of wise physicians who, when they give the more bitter drafts to the sick, often smear the rim of the cup with honey. For this purpose, these harmonious melodies of the psalms have been designed for us, that those who are of boyish age or wholly youthful in their character, while in appearance they sing, may in reality be educating their souls.

In other words, Basil tells us that music must be beautiful and enchanting so that people will learn the faith. When people love a song the repetition of that song makes the words become deeply imbedded in their souls.

Most Protestant Christians do not learn their theology through taking classes in dogmatics. I do not think that our understanding of the faith is shaped primarily by the study of the Bible as strange as that sounds at first. Our understanding of God and his love for us is taught by the hymns that we sing. Our music teaches both simple truth and complex ideas.

Music in many ways is the language of the soul. Music is able to touch us at the deepest level. Emily Saliers a member of the folk-rock group the Indigo Girls writes about her experience of singing "Let us Break Bread Together" in these words:

The images in that song tear me apart: "When I fall on my knees with my face to the rising sun, O Lord have mercy on me." I think of how this world and all of us need mercy. We are fallible creatures. "Have mercy on me" is a cry of the heart and soul. And when I sing this with a gathered community of vulnerable people who really wish to share the bread and wine of life's table and hope to live a life of truth and grace, the music goes right to my soul.

A third purpose of music is to calm our souls. We heard in our Old Testament Lesson about King Saul becoming agitated and distressed. The palace servants did not know any way to help him deal with his troubled soul. So, they summoned the young man who would eventually become king to come to the palace. David came and played his lyre for Saul. It was through David's music that Saul found relief.

So, music in worship can give peace to our inner being.

A fourth function of music is to bring healing to our souls. A couple of weeks ago, I saw a documentary on African American Gospel music on a classic movie station. This program introduced me to the work of Thomas Dorsey. He was not the trombone playing Big Band leader that my parents danced to in high school.

This Tommy Dorsey was born on July 1, 1899. He was a baby boy of color, born in Villa Rica, Ga., a small town some 40 miles west of Atlanta. He, one of seven brothers and sisters, was around the church most of his early life. His dad was a devout Baptist preacher, and his mother was an organist. She started young Thomas on the piano when he was 7 years old.

In his late teens, he decided to embark on a career as a blues musician, billed as Georgia Tom. This took him through the night clubs of Atlanta to the jazz houses on the south side of Chicago. Because of his heritage, he very shortly tired of that kind of life and gravitated toward Christian music. He became known as the father of Gospel Music. He wrote songs such as *Peace in the Valley* and *Precious Lord*.

In a taped interview in 1977, Thomas A. Dorsey told the following story, which happened 45 years earlier.

“My wife, Nettie, was about to bear our first child. I was called to St. Louis to sing in a revival. I wondered if I should go because of my wife’s condition. She persuaded me that I should go ahead, so I, alone in my Model A, drove to St. Louis.”

“During the first night of the meetings, a lad brought a telegram to me while I was still on the platform. It was horrible news. It was a message that my wife had died giving birth to our son.”

“I rushed to a phone while the people were still singing and found that the message was true. Mr. Gus Evans drove me back to Chicago that night.”

“When I arrived, I found that the wonderful baby boy was seemingly fine, and yet, that night he also died. I buried my wife and little son in the same casket.”

“I became very despondent and filled with grief. A few days later I visited with my good friend, Professor Frye. We walked around the college campus for a while and then went into one of the music rooms.”

“I sat down at a piano and began to improvise on the keyboard. Suddenly, I found myself playing a particular melody that I hadn’t played before that time. As I played, I began to say, ‘Blessed Lord, blessed Lord, blessed Lord.’ My friend walked over to me and said, ‘Why don’t you make that precious Lord?’ I then began to sing, ‘Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light; take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.’”

Dorsey found healing through music.

A final purpose of music is to lead us into the presence of God. Martin Luther once said:

I am strongly persuaded that after theology there is no art that can be placed on a level with music; for besides theology, music is the only art capable of affording peace and joy of the heart...the devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the Word of God.

I agree with Luther. Music has the power to lead us into the very presence of God.

Paul Claudel was a prominent French poet, playwright, and diplomat who was the recipient of multiple nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature. As a precocious youth, Claudel had come under the influence of the agnosticism and atheism that were beginning to dominate French intellectual life. He had even won a prize in school that had been personally awarded to him by Ernest Renan, the French scholar and writer who is most famous for his bestselling 1863 book *Vie de Jésus*, which, very controversially, had set out to “demythologize” the New Testament and to present Jesus as nothing but a mortal man.

However, Claudel was never fully satisfied with his life as an unbeliever. He continued to read widely on religious subjects, overcoming many of his intellectual reservations but unable to feel any spiritual conviction.

On Christmas Day in 1886, when he was eighteen years of age, Claudel attended High Mass at the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, celebrated by the city's still relatively new archbishop. He wasn't particularly moved by the liturgy. But he later returned for vespers, the evening service. "It was the gloomiest winter day," he later recalled, "and the darkest rainy afternoon over Paris."

He listened patiently to the recitation of the psalms. Then, as the cathedral choir was singing the *Magnificat*, something happened:

"In an instant, my heart was touched, and I believed. I believed with such a strength of adherence, with such an uplifting of my entire being, with such powerful conviction, with such a certainty leaving no room for any kind of doubt, that since then all the books, all the arguments, all the incidents and accidents of a busy life have been unable to shake my faith, nor indeed to affect it in any way."

The beautiful music opened him to the divine.

St. Augustine wrote, **"When you sing, you pray twice."** I believe that is true. It has been my experience that I have felt God's love; I have known his presence most fully while singing or listening to music.

Friends the beauty of music has great power. It speaks to and from the very depths of our being. It touches emotions and feelings beyond the reach of our reason. Music has the power to shape who we will become. God can touch us with his grace and love through music.

Today we at Clarence Presbyterian Church are dedicating our new Hymnals. Each generation has a need for new hymnals for two reasons. One reason is that some hymns lose their power to communicate over time. Many were written at the height of Christendom and reflect an almost martial attitude towards the faith. They no longer speak clearly to us. A second reason is that new hymns are being written every day. They tend to reflect the issues and understanding of the current context. These new hymns can often speak more directly to our experience of God in our own age. We will use this hymnal to deepen our worship.

For we know that music can be a positive power for good.

It can teach us truth,
it can give us courage,
and it can soothe our souls.

Music can even become a pathway into the very heart of God. Music can truly be a means of grace.

O Come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!