

<Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97:1-12; John 17:20-26>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

“The aim and final end of all music should be none other than the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul.” (Johann Sebastian Bach)

Today, as you are aware, is our annual spring Music Sunday, and before we do anything else I particularly want to say, “thank you,” to our choir, our guest musicians, and especially to Kotoe for organizing and preparing this time of worship, for the glory of God and the refreshment of the soul. Thank you!

As it is June 1st, it also happens to be my father’s birthday, and as it happens, his preferred classical composer is Johann Sebastian Bach. Thus, in honor of both Music Sunday and my dad, I thought I would look up some of his other sayings about music, as well. A few that stood out to me include, “It is easy to play any musical instrument; all you have to do is touch the right key at the right time and the instrument will play itself.” He has also said, “Music is an agreeable harmony for the honor of God and the permissible delights of the soul,” and, “I play the notes as they are written, but it is God who makes the music.”

However, I think my new favorite quote of all time, also uttered by Bach, is, “If I decide to be an idiot, then I’ll be an idiot on my own accord.”

But the sentiment that drove and inspired Bach, as he created music and as he lived his life in all aspects, was, “*Soli Deo Gloria*” - “To God be the glory.”

Certainly, this sentiment is the same one which gathers us here in worship this morning, and which guides not only our intent but our practices in this time. We gather, first and foremost, to give God glory. Even the very constitution of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms this, when commentating on the organization of a congregation in the first place. Such an intent is phrased, “we, the undersigned, in response to the grace of God...” (G-1.0201). From our inception, the gifts we have received and the gifts we seek to utilize are to reflect, in and through us, the glory of God, first and foremost.

It was that ‘first and foremost’ which uplifted and drove Bach to compose his music, and which still guides us as we worship each week, and notably as we enjoy the gifts of musical talent and thought today. It is this ‘first and foremost’ which guides us as we consider the gifts at our disposal, the gifts we have received, in the everyday operations and special ministries of our congregation (and if you’d ever like to have a conversation as to how you might best use your gifts or leave a legacy to the church through your estate, we will be happy to have that conversation with you, and thank you for your consideration). The use of our gifts is for the glory of God, first and foremost. And, it was that ‘first and foremost’ which was at the root of the troubled situation Paul and Silas found themselves in from our reading this morning from the Book of Acts.

For several days, the two apostles were followed around by a girl who had a spirit of divination, who loudly (and continually) proclaimed, “these men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And admittedly, I sometimes wonder how nice it would be to have someone going around with me proclaiming, “this man knows what he’s talking about, listen to him and do as he says!” But, there are greater dynamics at play.

Eventually, Paul has enough of this and casts the spirit out of the girl, freeing her from its possession. I've wondered at this on occasion, was this merely a matter of Paul being irritated by a young girl who never stopped talking? Now that I'm a parent, I can understand that a bit more, but that's not the rationale. It goes back to who Paul and Silas are slaves of, and who this girl is a slave to. For Paul and Silas are slaves, or servants, of the Most High God - all that they do, all that they offer, is in service to God and God's Kingdom. *Soli Deo Gloria*, first and foremost.

This girl, with a spirit of divination, is not. Socially and culturally, she is a slave/servant of her owners, who utilize this capacity for divination not to glorify God but to make money, lining their own pockets at the expense of another. And more than that, this young girl is a slave to this spirit of divination, which likely compelled her to speak and prophesy whether she wanted to or not. Certainly not a gift which enabled and elucidated glory to God.

Then, later on when Paul and Silas are in jail for upsetting the income of a couple people and frustrating the status quo of a community, they are given a chance at escape. Certainly, that is what the jailor presumed. While singing hymns and giving glory to God, an earthquake strikes the region, knocking the cell door off its hinges.

If this were a movie, perhaps with Johnny Depp playing Paul, then we would see it as a moment of divine intervention. But Paul and Silas see through the event to the deeper issues at hand: this jailor is a slave/servant to the expectations of a foreign government ruling in his homeland, and he is so distraught at the idea that the prisoners escaped - through no fault of his own - that he was ready to take his own life before even checking on the situation.

Can you imagine being so caught up in a cultural dynamic of expectation that suicide is a better alternative than being seen a failure?

What are you a slave/servant to, these days? What are we beholden to, as a congregation? And more than that, does such a responsibility, such a relationship, reflect a reality and a use of gifts which give glory to God? And if that answer to that is, "no," then we have an opportunity to prayerfully have a discussion.

We join Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he prays, ahead of being betrayed and arrested. While the three synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark, and Luke - merely mention that Jesus went to pray and that the disciples fell asleep, John recounts that prayer in greater detail. As Jesus concludes his prayer in John's Gospel, he does so by stating that all he has prayed for, all he now hopes and all he has worked for, has been so that the people would believe more fully in God, and would be of one mind in the use of their gifts, of one mind in their lives of faith and service to the Kingdom of God.

And therein, in the midst of Jesus' earnest and faithful prayer, we have the key to how we approach and understand our gifts: *Soli Deo Gloria*. All our gifts, all our capacities, all our efforts, all our energy, intelligence, imagination, love, and prayer is to be used for the glory of God. First and foremost. So that we, as Jesus prays, may be one - one with each other, and one with God.

And the conflict, the issue, arises when we are not one, when we are not using our gifts for the glory of God, and instead are either using them for our own benefit alone, or being used by

them for ulterior motives. And as a case in point, we can consider the topics of conversation which are considered to be culturally taboo in our church world.

Do you know that the minister - and I am not speaking only about me but about all ministers - learn about every aspect of life within their congregation except for one? We are trusted, in confidence, with all the hopes, all the sorrows, all the fears, all the mistakes, all the celebrations in the life of an individual or a community, except for one. Would anyone care to guess what that one topic is? An individual's checkbook.

But since we're talking about how Paul and Silas are arrested and imprisoned for interrupting the livelihood of someone, even though that livelihood came by taking advantage of the unnamed girl, then it is something we can talk about now, as well. All I want to say, though, is that the things we hold secret are the very things which we allow to have power over us, and not in an uplifting or affirming way. They hold us in servitude, and deny us the fullness of life abundant. I'm not going to ask you to divulge something you're not ready to, but I would ask you to consider how it might have power over you.

God wants us to use our gifts - all our gifts - to enact ministry and live out mission, to join in fellowship and worship and service, in ways that bring about life and vitality. Vibrancy and energy. The music we hear this morning; these are the gifts of God at work for the people of God, uplifting and energizing us. The ministries and missions of this congregation; these are the gifts of God at work for the people of God, connecting and affirming us and the world around us. That we all may be one - one with each other, one with God.

*Soli Deo Gloria.* First and foremost. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*