

Acting Out sermon series
Make A Joyful Noise
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What's your favorite hymn? During COVID, I got bored, so I put together a little game I called Hymn Madness. It was like March Madness, but instead of 64 basketball teams, there were 64 hymns. I put it out there on the interwebs and the Facebooks to all my friends and literally tens of people voted each week, whittling down the field to a Final Four: Amazing Grace, Great Is Thy Faithfulness, It Is Well with my Soul, and Here I Am, Lord. How many named one of those as their favorite?

I would guess your favorite hymn is tied to a favorite memory: standing next to your grandma singing it in worship, hearing a loved one hum the tune around the house. I remember riding in the car with Sydney when she was two and tearing up when I heard her sing, for the first time, the words to "Sanctuary," a song I used to sing to her when I would rock her to sleep. And one of the first songs Molly learned was the Gloria Patri, because we sang it every Sunday in church. Of course, her version was a little different: "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Homey Boat."

Chances are, for many of us our earliest memories of worship have a musical soundtrack. The majestic pipe organ, the beautiful piano, the robust choir, the woman sitting behind you who sang off-key. You may not remember any points from any sermons you heard growing up, but you can remember singing "How Great Thou Art" or "The Old Rugged Cross." And when you sang them, you were moved, experiencing God's presence in a way that words simply could not capture. Music opens up an expressive part of us that allows us to connect with God on a different level than a sermon or prayer does, tapping into our deepest emotions. If you don't agree, ask any parent at Crestwood who's sang "I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry" on Baptism Sunday.

Back in 1996, as I began to deal with what I felt was a call to the ministry, I struggled to find the words to explain to my friends and family what I was feeling. How do you begin to articulate this strange and wondrous call? Then in church on Sunday we sang "Here I Am, Lord." I cried as I sang "Here I am Lord, is it I, Lord? I have heard you calling in the night. I will go Lord, if you lead me, I will hold your people in my heart." Those words captured what my soul was feeling and affirmed for me the call I had been experiencing.

Sally Brown, a professor of preaching, says "Sacred singing is full-bodied prayer, an act of worship that demands head and heart and sinew, a metaphor for discipleship itself." Music plays a big part of our theological and spiritual formation. We may not be able to articulate our theology of God's redemption of humanity through the sacrifice of Jesus, but we can sing "Amazing Grace." We may be at a loss for words when asked to devise an ecological perspective of the creative reign of God, but we can sing "For the Beauty of the Earth." For many of us, the hymns we sing in worship have as much influence on our beliefs as the words we hear.

This revelation is as old as the Bible. Moses' sister Miriam sings a song of thanksgiving after Israel crossed the Red Sea. Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon all sang in response to the gift of baby Jesus. The book of Revelation is filled with singing at the anticipation of the coming judgment and the new Jerusalem. And one whole book of the Bible, the Psalms, is a collection of 150 hymns and prayers. The singing of hymns and songs is so pervasive throughout the Bible

that it leads us to believe that singing has long been one of the most effective and necessary ways to communicate with God.

The importance of music for praising God is not lost on us today. Think of all the ways we use music in worship, from our prelude to our hymns to our offertory to our postlude. And can we stop a second and give God thanks for the incredibly talented people who provide that music for us? Cindy/Jane/Frank/choir, thank you for the gift you share with us each Sunday! Music sets the tone of the service, welcomes us in, joins us together, and sends us out. That joining together not only takes place through the singing of the same words together, but in the act of singing itself. When we sing together, we are living out the unity we have through Christ.

Think about the power that exists in uniting our voices in song. Amy and I are big live music fans, and this past week, we saw the Chicks in concert. As expected, they closed with their iconic song, "Goodbye Earl." When an arena full of people, mostly empowered women, sang at the top of their lungs, "Earl had to die!" I was REALLY glad my name wasn't Earl! If you've ever sang along with your favorite song at a concert, you know that transcendent feeling. Try to describe it. You can't. You can only experience it as you add your voice to the choir.

Music not only joins us together as a congregation, but as a universal body of Christ. When we sing "Holy Holy Holy" or "Be Thou My Vision," we aren't just joining our voices together here in this sanctuary. We are uniting with voices across the world and through the ages that have sung those same words everywhere from cathedrals to country churches. Music has the ability to transcend boundaries of time and space, to bring together distant cultures and eras. When we sing "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," we are singing the same words sung by the followers of Martin Luther in the 1500s. Some of our hymns and tunes date back to the centuries immediately following the life of Christ.

Music not only condenses time, but space as well. Our denominational hymn book, the Chalice Hymnal, was put together with the intent to reflect the diversity of God's people. So when we sing "Somos Uno en Christo" or the African-American spiritual "Kum Bah Yah" or the Jamaican "Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ" or the South African "Siyahamba" we are opening ourselves to that culture's language of praise and expanding our own family album of the children of God.

Because music has such power to join us together, to move us emotionally and to speak for and to us spiritually, I realize that we have to treat it with caution. This is especially true when it comes to music for worship. Worship is a holy time, a sacred time, and the music we sing and listen to should reflect that. Just because music is popular or appealing does not make it appropriate for worship. Believe it or not, there is some good Christian rap music out there, but I don't want to sing it as a hymn. Now, I admit I've let some secular music creep into funerals, because it's hard to say "no" to a family that wants to end their loved one's funeral with the UK fight song. But, for the most part, the music of worship is meant to reflect the sanctity of what we have come here to do, to praise our God.

So how do we find unity within that diversity, especially about a subject as personal as music? One challenge for us is to work toward developing a more expansive taste for what we sing on Sunday. Remember that hymn you named as your favorite? At some point in your life, you sang it for the first time. It was unfamiliar. And that hymn you don't like? Well, that might be someone else's favorite. You may not want to sing every verse of a hymn, but those words often tell stories and articulate profound statements of faith. I encourage you to pay attention to them, because they are chosen with much thought and for a specific reason each Sunday. Author Marva Dawn puts says, "a congregation has to love each other enough to sing each other's

songs.” I don’t expect us to know and like every hymn we sing. But I do expect us to sing them all, because each song is a prayer we offer to God. St. Augustine is quoted as saying, “The person who sings prays twice.”

But we can only sing each other’s songs if we allow ourselves to become a part of the music of our worship. I know not everyone likes to sing out loud and not everyone who auditions becomes members of our world-renowned choir. And when I was younger, I was known to “watermelon watermelon watermelon” my way through songs I didn’t know. But that shouldn’t keep us from singing. Because God doesn’t care how well we sing. God simply cares if we sing.

I learned this from Gary. Gary was a member of a congregation I served in seminary. Gary and his family were faithful worshippers and had their accustomed spot in the pews. It was always interesting to note that people went out of their way to avoid sitting in the two or three rows in front of Gary and his family on Sunday morning.

You see, Gary, who was in his 50s, had an intellectual disability, and had the mental capacity of a six- or seven-year-old. He also had one of the worst singing voices I’ve ever heard. His singing was slurred and never anywhere close to the right key. And he didn’t have the social development to recognize his lack of singing ability. So he just sang loud. really loud.

One Sunday, without thinking, I sat down in front of Gary. As soon as opening hymn started, I realized my mistake. I steeled myself for a service full of Gary’s singing, settling into a spirit of annoyance instead of thanksgiving. And then God smacked me upside the head. I realized what an asset Gary was to our worship, what a gift his voice was to our singing. Because Gary was singing not from his mouth or his vocal chords, but from his heart, and every word he sang was a word of sincere praise and thanksgiving. In his child-like innocence, Gary didn’t care what he sounded like or what others thought of him. He only cared to let God know of his love and thankfulness in full voice. He was doing as Ps. 98 commanded him, making a joyful noise to the Lord.

I say to everyone who thinks they can’t sing, that if God gave you voice, you can sing. Or at least hum loudly. Don Saliers, a professor of theology and liturgy, says “there is something about humans that needs to make music.” Amen! That’s a God-given gift, and one in which we can find true enjoyment by using it to praise and worship our God. God doesn’t care what key it’s in or how many beats you skip. Psalm 5 says, “Let all who take refuge in God rejoice; let them ever sing for joy.” The joy of music does not come from singing well; it comes from singing sincerely. So let’s sing!