

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 May 16, 2010 (Easter 7 - C)
 John 17:20-26; "Behold My Glory"
 The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was in seminary the first exam I took in my Systematic Theology course was not what I'd have expected: we were to select one of a list of 3 advent hymns and discuss the doctrine of the person of Christ expressed in the hymn. I'll never hear the beautiful "Of the Father's Love Begotten" in the same way again after dissecting it phrase by phrase, verse by verse but it was a wonderful exercise in furthering and solidifying my understanding of the role of music in worship.

It's always rather interesting to me when someone comes up to me after worship and speaks about how the hymns for the day fit so well into the overall theme of the service. I'm sure you all know that's no accident – we carefully choose the hymns we'll sing during worship and Tom takes great care in his selection of the choral and instrumental music as well – our worship is a package and I know my hope each week is that something in the service will touch you and bring you closer to God.

Because that's the sole purpose of worship – to help each of us have an encounter with the living God. The audience of our worship is God and God alone. And furthermore, worship is not a spectator sport – it's up to each of us to engage in worship – whether facilitated by word or song, prayer or scripture, strains of music or by silence.

Ann Broyles writes, "When we come prepared for worship, expecting to meet God, then we are able to more fully experience that designated time and place as holy ground and sacred space. Rather than sitting back to hear what the preacher will say or how well the choir will sing, we join ourselves – body, mind, and spirit – to our community of faith. It is our worship; we are important to this drama. God awaits our response. Worship is a dialogue with God and those around us. Always, when we worship, God is among us."

She continues, "All that we do in worship is known as "liturgy", literally this means the work of the people. There are no distinctions of "entertainer" and "audience", but rather, a community of individuals who play different roles as they actively participate in worship together."

Active participation in worship: that's our call, isn't it.

Jesus prays in our gospel reading this morning that they may all be one; to behold my glory which you, God, have given me in your love for me before the foundation of the world. I wonder if this isn't a charge to all of us as we worship: that we might all be one, in the presence of God's glory which shines all around us and through us.

When have you felt that you truly worshipped? Felt the breathtaking awesomeness of God's presence that brought you perhaps to tears, at the very least to humble praise and thanksgiving.

I heard our South Africa travelers speak of their worship experiences there – in small churches where they didn't know the spoken language. But strangely enough, it didn't matter to them – they knew they were in the midst of God's presence – that's what made worship alive.

My own experience at Bethel Love was similar to that, though most of the time I understood what was being said. When the two hour worship experience was over, Cole Ellertson and I looked at each other and said, "Wow – we've worshipped!" We were at the same time energized and exhausted but we knew we had been in the presence of God through that community.

I've heard many of you speak of the experience of worship when Integrity is here – it's different, isn't it. For me, it's a time of active participation in the congregation – they talk back! I remember this year warning the confirmand who was reading and interpreting scripture that day that they probably would talk back – sometimes the words are intelligible, sometimes it's simply an "amen", sometimes it's just a sound from the throat, sometimes it's a smile and a nod – and they did.

Perhaps it's the active participation of the congregation that makes worship alive. Of course, we all participate in different ways, but the excitement is contagious and my experience says that the excitement builds on itself, enabling all of us to have a better experience of connecting to God and to each other.

What happens when we walk in the doors of this place? The confirmands this year have often called it a safe place – we don't call it sanctuary lightly, do we. When we walk in the door, do we recognize that we are in a different place? A sacred, safe space? Of course we bring our joys and concerns, celebrations and worries with us – but isn't this the time to offer them to God? We're all the same here – we're all simply, not so simply actually, children of God. What we do during the week doesn't matter for these few minutes of our week and it doesn't matter what we're going to do after this time of worship - what matters is that we bring our full selves into the presence of God where we may all be one. We're all united in looking heavenward and each and every part of our worship liturgy is designed to help us make that connection with God, come into God's presence, all to God's glory.

Back to your experience of a time when you truly felt in the presence of God in your worship – what did all of the examples I used have in common? Music. It was the music that engaged members of our congregation in South Africa – all of them spoke of it with a sense of awe. It was music of joy, of celebration, of praise to God. It was the music at Bethel Love that pulled Cole and me into the presence of God, opening us in ways to worship we hadn't imagined. And it is the music of the Goodwill Rescue Mission Men of God choir or the Souls of Integrity that touches us in profound ways – even when there is gentle music playing under our preaching and praying. And isn't our worship so profound on All Saint's Sunday when we hear the Requiem sung – I know for me it's a time of sadness but at the same time, a connection with loved ones – a connection with the great company of saints - a time to remember and praise God for lives well lived, for lives well loved. Or when we join in singing the Hallelujah Chorus on Easter – these are times when we are indeed one.

Music speaks to us on a level that's hard to put into words – all kinds of music for we don't all prefer the same type. Today we celebrate Church Music Sunday – we give thanks to God for the ministry of our Chancel Choir and our Carillon Bellringers. It's a

ministry that requires many hours, much commitment, from each participant – rehearsals during the week, leading us in worship on Sunday mornings after another rehearsal – all to the glory of God as this dedicated group leads us in our liturgy. The Christian church has kept singing for two thousand years: so many examples in our Bible stories – Mary sang “my soul magnifies the Lord”, when the angels announced to the shepherds the birth of the child Jesus, a heavenly chorus joined in the news; when the crowds met Jesus as he entered Jerusalem they sang an ancient psalm of Hosanna; on the last night of his life after they had shared the meal with his disciples, they all sang a hymn and went out to Gethsemane. And St. Augustine knew the power and importance of music in the Christian faith: he wrote, “Brothers and sisters, let us sing alleluia now. Let us sing as travelers along the road, but keep walking...so sing alleluia and keep walking.” Talitha Arnold writes in her book, Worship for Vital Congregations, “In ways not even science can explain, music connects with the deepest part of our souls. Its rhythm and rhymes are often the earliest things we can remember – which is why preschoolers memorize their ABCs in song and advertisers come up with catchy jingles. Music is often the last thing we forget.” Talitha reports visiting people in nursing homes who can’t remember her name or the names of their children but still know “Silent Night” by heart.

She continues, “Music can take us out of our everyday lives of paying bills, earning a living, chauffeuring kids, and immerse us in a universe of the eternal. Not only does it express our praise and longing for God, but it gives us an experience of God’s divine beauty.”

“By turning our attention to God, music fulfills an important pastoral as well as priestly and liturgical role in worship. A parishioner told her about a day when he went to worship, obsessed by a problem that he had been turning around and around in his mind. At every turn it seemed unsolvable – but at worship they sang the opening hymn: Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes – he said the melody that opened the hymn, combined with those great words of wonder, “immortal, invisible” snapped something loose in his soul. He was no longer circling around and around the same problem. He was swept into a state of prayer from which he later returned with fresh energy to address his situation – much needed pastoral care came by directing him to the core of all human existence: the praise of God.

It’s true: through word and sound, music can replace our old feelings of despair or hurt that we bring to worship with God’s always new, always fresh good news of hope, faith, and love for us and for our world.

And just as importantly: when the community comes together and sings, we are one. Singing together is life embodied: Don Saliers says, “When life is deeply felt or perceived, music gives shape and voice to the very pattern of our experienced world, through pitch, rhythm, and intensity, through lyrics and harmony.”

Think about how you feel when we sing, “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord” and how it gives shape to our experience compared to “Joy to the World.” Again from Saliers: “the tensions, resolutions, moods, convictions, and playfulness of everyday life are translated into patterns of sound...the act of singing together of life lived and felt binds heart and mind with ordered sound.”

While today we celebrate those who lead us in our music ministry and the profound gifts they bring, we in the congregation aren’t off the hook either. The act of singing binds us

together, makes us one – points us toward the presence of God. We're a congregation on a faith journey – we need each other – as we look heavenward. That means all of us are called to participate in the singing of the hymns, the responses.

Marva Dawn wrote in her book, Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down, a Theology of Worship for this Urgent Time, "I often hear that while the music the choir sings should, of course, be great, the congregation's singing need not be so elevated. This profoundly disturbing attitude seems to be prevalent throughout the United States. The question is, however, why should we settle for less than the best in our offering to God of praise? I should think that congregants as well as special singers would want to give God all that their voice, mind, and heart could give, to worship God with excellence of intent and execution. If we do not work hard to choose great music for congregational singing and to make that singing great, perhaps we have lost sight of the greatness of the God who is the subject and object of our worship. We can praise God by singing to the best of our ability the music we encounter as a means of worship."

Let's remember that praising God, worshipping God, doesn't have to be in tune. So sing out to the glory of God!

Our inward journeys are not enough. Our lives are tangled up with everyone else's in ways beyond our knowing. So as with our singing, as in all practices of faith, we need one another. Only then, can we sing praise to our God with one voice. Let's make a joyful noise – together. And maybe, just maybe that's a partial answer to Jesus' prayer that we may all be one and know his glory. Amen.

Let us pray:

May the word of Christ dwell in us richly; may we teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in our hearts, may we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. Amen.