

Psalm 30
Colossians 3: 12-17
February 9, 2014
Hamilton Union Church
Music Appreciation Sunday

There is no small amount of irony that in a service devoted to appreciating the spiritual importance of music in worship the largest single portion is devoted to... words. I am reminded of enduring more than one long speech on hard chairs about the fact that we are far too dependent on verbal communication. Thus a twenty minute sermon about the virtues of music is both somewhat humorous and probably futile.

And yet this is all the more reason to have one Sunday which forces the preacher to bow in homage to the dimension of worship which far better reaches the soul than his or her finely crafted words. It is sadly necessary to have a Sunday that repents of the arrogant attitude that sees music as accompaniment for the real purpose of worship which is to hear and respond to the *word of God*. It is good to have a Sunday which suggests that worship might be a more powerful vehicle of God's love and attention if the roles were reversed: that the spoken word is the accompaniment of the divine symphony which goes beyond spoken language and needs no speech to touch the human heart. Indeed it is important to have a Sunday where the preacher recognizes the painful truth: in God's understanding speech is an accommodation to our weakness. Why else would God suffer himself to be expressed in the words of a book using the pitifully limited medium of human language?

And yet as Presbyterian Christians who are heirs to the to the protestant reformation nearly five hundred years ago we have a legacy of deep suspicion of music. We have inherited

the fear that music too easily becomes performance. We are afraid that when music becomes performance it no longer glorifies God but ourselves. We are suspicious of big churches with amazing choirs and dismiss them and the thousands of people who throng to those services as simply forms of entertainment with little or no spiritual value. Our historic suspicion of singing has been even more directed to the use of musical instruments. Through the 17th century and in to the 18th you would find no organ or piano. Then in the mid-18th century congregations started requesting the introduction of musical instruments. The church I served in Enfield, Connecticut represented the reunion of the colonial church which split over the proposed introduction of a string quartet.

And yet, as the scriptures we just heard indicate—and there are many others—music is *the* highest and best expression of love for God. It is music, not words alone which express the fullest range of human emotion. It is music, not words, which reach the dimensions of life which do not respond to logical categories, intellectual proofs and certainties. To the extent that a sermon may move you it is not the words so much as the *sense* which touches your heart. Music does not tempt me to argument or debate. There are no raging controversies about predestination, the authority of scripture and what it means that Jesus is Lord. Music invites us simply to receive and allow ourselves to respond.

And I propose that it is this attitude of receiving that places music as the original form of Godly communication. Words, in this culture anyway, tend to divide more than unite. Words create communities of the likeminded. Music on the other hand, when it is an expression of faith and love creates a canopy of grace where all are received and all can come before God.

This is why the apostle Paul exhorts the Colossians to urge each other on with “songs, hymns and spiritual songs.” Sing together, make music together; don’t preach at each other.

This morning I propose that the profound reality of worship is not that music accompanies the words of scripture and sermon or that it is the other way around. True and spiritually real worship happens then our human expression of love for God whether spoken or sung or played on an instrument is the accompaniment of the great song of God. Music and spoken word transforms our lives when we see ourselves as instruments in one great orchestra and chorus whose composer is God. For this to happen we must make God’s symphony our primary focus of attention. And this means that we listen for God in the ordinary routines of our daily lives; that we create time in each day where we are quiet enough to listen for the still small voice; that we look to Jesus whose life perfectly expresses the great song of love in a single human life and thus teaches us how to listen; and also *where* to listen. What a joy it is when we realize that God has composed a part for each and every human being—for you and me; and that it is God’s joy when we discover that our very lives are music to God’s ears. Amen.