

13th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

Ephesians 5:15-20

Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Each Wednesday morning, I gather with an ecumenical group of clergy at the Church of the Good Shepherd on Main Street. I typically swing by Magee's to pick up my weekly indulgence of a glazed donut and orange juice and then I head to the church and go upstairs to the library to meet with my colleagues. We typically spend about an hour or so talking about the lectionary readings for the upcoming Sunday.

As it so happens, the library where we meet is just across the hall from the organ loft. As we were going over today's passage from Ephesians, their organist began practicing for today's service. As we spoke about Ephesians, that magnificent organ began a thunderous version of "When Morning Gilds the Skies." Now, I'm not the best multitasker in the world, so I struggled to pay attention to our lectionary conversation because I physically could not help but sing to myself "may Jesus Christ be praised!"

I have been singing that wondrous song of praise for over 30 years now. And, as we were talking about Paul's imperative in today's passage to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves, I was reminded of the power of congregational song.

Three of the four lectionary passages today speak about wisdom, including today's passage from Ephesians. Paul implores us to be careful how we live, and to lean into wisdom. Do not be foolish, he says, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

And one of the most powerful ways that we understand what the will of the Lord is is by singing together. I firmly believe that there is much wisdom to be found in singing the faith together; it is a powerful thing, singing together in the name of the Lord.

I grew up in the Presbyterian Church. I was raised not only by my biological family but by my faith family, the people who are First Presbyterian Church of Dalton, Georgia. And, although I can't believe I'm admitting this in a sermon, I don't remember all that many sermons from my childhood. But what I *do* remember, is singing.

I remember singing Silent Night by candlelight at our Christmas Eve services.

I remember learning how to read music and then sitting by the organist to help him turn pages as he played Vidor's Toccata on Easter morning, while being completely awestruck that he was able to use both his hands and his feet to fill the sanctuary with a depth that reached the very core of my body.

I remember singing, at the end of every service, the hymn we will sing as our closing hymn, "God Be With You Till We Meet Again."

I know that God is love because I've sung "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" more times than I can count. I know that I am a sinner because "Kyrie Eleison" is a part of my being. I know that I'm forgiven because my one of my favorite songs is "Glory to God Whose Goodness Shines On Me." I know the power of the Lord's Supper because I sing "Let Us Break Bread Together On Our Knees." The list can go on and on and on and on. There is a *power* in congregational singing. It is a force that draws us together in mysterious and wondrous ways.

And there's actual science behind this mystery! Numerous studies have shown that singing together as a group has a chemical effect on the brain. It is now known that when people sing together, their levels of oxytocin skyrocket! Oxytocin is the hormone that promotes connection and social bonding. Interestingly enough, oxytocin is the same chemical that is released into the bloodstream when a mother is breastfeeding her child. Therefore, congregational singing chemically connects us in very intimate ways. When you sing with someone, something is shared that goes deeper than we might realize.

Also, congregational singing literally rewires our brain. Other studies have shown that when people sing together, their levels of dopamine and serotonin go up. Although I am surely no expert on my matter, it is my understanding that both dopamine and serotonin are the chemicals that stimulate the brain's pleasure center.¹ In fact, the antidepressant medication that I take is what's called an SSRI which is short for "Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors." Basically, it boosts my brain's production of serotonin to help ward off depression. Congregational singing does something very similar.

I'd like to share with you two stories of when I experienced an intimate bonding moment with others who I have sung with in the context of liturgical music. I have so many stories that, trust me, it was *very* hard to limit it to two. But, here they are. One is sad and one is happy.

When I was in seminary, when I didn't have any other worship responsibilities, I would worship at Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Atlanta. The church is literally across the street from the state capital building. I always found a fitting symbol of the tumultuous relationship between church and state the fact that the two antique Civil War-era cannons point directly at the front doors of the church. Anyways, that congregation had taken a strong and prophetic stance against the death penalty. Therefore, whenever the state of Georgia executed a child of God, usually by lethal injection, many of us would gather on the steps of the church, across the street from the capital, to protest.

At the exact time of the execution, we would all be silent and the bells of the church would ring a sad and sorrowful tone. After the church bell finished its lament, about a dozen of us would raise up handbells of various tones in an A minor scale. Randomly, we would ring the bells to create a chord full of lament. Hundreds of us would stand still and listen to the sad chord, a kind of unspoken liturgy, lamenting our brokenness and the

¹ With many thanks to this article for the science behind this sermon. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/blogs/the-science-behind-why-choir-singing-is-good-for-you-1.4594292>

rampant injustices of the world. I can think of few times in my life when I've felt more connected with people in understanding the work we have before us.

The second story is a much happier one. During my college and seminary years, I would often spend the summers as a counselor, program director, lifeguard, and musician at my presbytery's summer camp, Camp Cherokee. After a full week of children and swimming and singing and chicken fingers and ropes courses and the like, us counselors would often gather for a closing worship after the children left before we had our 24 hours off before the next batch of campers arrived.

This particular afternoon, I was in charge of worship. The children had left, us counselors had spent the afternoon cleaning up the camp so it would be spotless for the next group of kids. We gathered for worship and worship was about the last thing in the world we wanted to do. We couldn't wait to get the heck out there to rest before returning later the next day.

Worship leadership is challenging enough when people *want* to be doing it. It's even more anguish when you are called to lead worship with a bunch of people who absolutely do *not* want to be doing it.

I led the counselors in a traditional confession sequence. We prayed to God and confessed our sins together. After doing this, I announced that we were forgiven by God and, as a sung response, sung the lively Caribbean version of "Halle, Halle, Hallelujah." However, our "hallelujah" was *anything* but lively. In fact, we were so tired, we didn't even bother getting up out of our chairs to sing it. We were so tired and cranky that our Halle, Halle, Hallelujah sounded more like a depressing funeral dirge than a song of jubilation.

But Philip was not going to allow this to happen. Philip was the 8 year old son of the camp director who had joined us for worship. After I finished leading the song on guitar, Philip looked at me with disgust and said bluntly, "what the heck was *that*?! That was *not* a good hallelujah! Do it again!"

Exasperated, I started singing it again, and our version was not much better than the first. Philip, however, was determined. He went around the circle and physically grabbed our hands and made us stand up. Then he began to dance around and sing loudly with a smile and clap his hands. Eventually, we couldn't help it. Thanks to Philip, we began an unabashed and joyful hallelujah, one that was appropriate to be sung after having all our sins washed away by God's abundant mercy. We sang gleefully, and the dopamine, the serotonin, and the oxytocin started flowing in our brains because of the wisdom of an 8 year old prophet named Philip.

Friends, Paul has told us time and time again in Ephesians that we are called to build up the body of Christ. And congregational singing is one of the most powerful tools in our belt. There is wisdom to be found when we gather to obey Paul's command to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs *together*.

Last week, we talked about what it means to pack wisely for the journey ahead. As you and I start our first school year together with me as your pastor, let us pack wisely for what God is calling us to do together in Christ's name. And, you know what, our voices don't weigh a thing!

In the name of the God who fills our hearts with song. Amen.