

Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we consider our commitment "to love one another as God in Christ has loved us" in the pledge: "We will live in harmony with one another respecting the diversity of our Christian experience with no expectation that we shall walk in lockstep or wear a theological uniform."

With apologies to Rogers and Hammerstein, the church is "alive with the sound of music." The hills and the church have a common source. Both the music of nature and songs of faith flow from the Creator. Pastor and hymn-writer Carolyn Winfrey Gillette attempted to explain "Why we Sing" rather than merely think or talk with one another in worship. She concluded, "We sing because music is a gift from God. It is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, our greatest joys, and our most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally. Like all gifts from God, it is one that God calls us to use with gratitude." (*Christian Reflection*, 18, p. 11.)

**Music carries the language of the soul.** The psalmists called us together in worship today with an invitation to "sing to the LORD a new song" and a doxology, "Happy are those who live in your House ever singing your praise." Every Sunday school child knows that the 150 Psalms located at the center of our Bible are the songs of Israel, but the music of faith is not restricted to the Psalter. Let those who have an ear to hear listen to the songs of faith that erupt like a Broadway musical throughout the Bible. Moses and Israel then Miriam and the women sang praises to God for the deliverance from the Egyptian army after crossing the sea (Ex 15). Throughout Deuteronomy instruction to Israel comes with a command to sing the message of the Law of God. In Judges, "Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang. . . Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the LORD I will sing, I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel (5:1,3)." The national history reports, "David appointed ministers of song in the Tabernacle" (1 Chr 6:31), and the people sang and danced as they brought up the Ark of Covenant (1 Chr 13:8). David appointed Asaph "for the singing of praises to the Lord" (1 Chr 16), and the songs that follow are repeated in Psalms 105, 96, and 106. One entire book of the Old Testament, the love sonnet of Solomon, is identified as "the song of songs (1:1)." The Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Micah, Zephaniah, and Zechariah repeatedly call for Israel to sing praise to God. The birth narratives in Luke are punctuated with songs from each of the main characters, from angels, and from the elders in the Temple. In Ephesians (5:19), Paul challenges the church: "sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts." Hymns of the early church emerge throughout the epistles. Revelation is a book of worship with heavenly choirs singing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come (4:8)" and, "You are worthy (9)."

Music is soul language that wells up from the very depths of our being; it has long been a human medium to express strong commitment such as devotion to country, the bond of friendship and family, and the romantic emotions of lovers. Perhaps that is why the affections of patriotism and romance tend to seep into our songs of faith and worship. The medium gets confused with the message, and emotionally we sometimes have difficulty separating the eternal from the temporal, the sacred from the secular. My minister of music in my teen years, my mentor in sacred music, Fritz Smith, died a few weeks ago with Alzheimer's. His wife Shirley wrote that long after memories of people and events had faded, Fritz could still sing his faith. I recall his careful guidance of youth in learning songs that were appropriate for worship and teaching us to distinguish songs that were worthy from melodies and messages that offered little more than feel-good experiences. Patriotism is good, but should not be confused with worship. Romance is good, but falls short of expressing the unconditional love of God.

**The songs of faith bond the integrity of the church.** Two weeks ago, we were in Los Angeles attending the annual conference of the International Council of Community Churches. Experiences of worship in this group have formed landmarks in my pilgrimage of faith. I have never experienced such diversity within a church community. ICCC was formed in 1950 with the merger of two congregational communities, one black and one white. Both were ecumenical in spirit, believing that Christ was more important than denomination. In 1950 they came together in public witness that Christ is greater than race. When we come together in worship, we sing ourselves together. I have never been in such an alive congregation. During sermons, drama, or music presentations people are vocal in their involvement. Here and there, someone will stand up in affirmation of the message. During reading of scripture, songs, and sermons, some raise their hands in the Pentecostal expression of openness to the Spirit. Along with many of my Methodist, Catholic, and Presbyterian friends, I am among those who sit in quiet meditation. Perhaps it is my racial bias, but it seems that we really come alive when the worship is led by folks with African roots. Last Sunday we heard James Forbes, one of the outstanding preachers of America, former seminary professor and retired pastor of Riverside Church in New York. Forbes is entertaining, but I don't expect him to become an American idol. He invited congregational participation in songs of faith urging us to listen to the message. He sang for us a love

song he wrote for his wife. He remembered the Pentecostal churches of his youth and spoke of the importance of the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” as the most important gift of the Spirit. Strangely, the songs helped to bring us together.

We also heard a concert performance of the Spirit Chorale of Los Angeles an African-American choir specializing in the spirituals that grew out of the African culture in America. They were a chorus of sixteen professionals, all of whom were trained musicians and directors of various choirs in the area. Apart from the pure entertainment of a great musical performance, the director Byron Smith acknowledged that they were Christians. What began as a concert turned into an unplanned worship event. If I ever had a doubt, I was convinced again that music is the language of the soul.

***The church is called to “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*** The Apostle’s word to the church is integrity. The one Lord, one faith, one baptism calls us to be one body in Christ. I suspect that churches to whom this epistle is addressed are not so different from us. They contain a wide variety of persons with diverse culture, experience, and maybe even ethnic origin. Paul notes the common ground on which we stand: *one* body, *one* Spirit, *one* hope of your calling, *one* Lord, one faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of all. This is one of the strongest Trinitarian statements in the New Testament noting the diverse work of God among us—the unity of the Spirit, the one God and Father, and the measure of Christ’s gift. With all of the hullabaloo and controversy over Trinitarian theology we sometimes miss the message that the essential nature of God is about diversity of function and integrity of person. God is a community of love, and if we are going to be the church reflecting the continuation of the Incarnation of God in Christ, the body of Christ on earth, we must model our relationship with each other on very being of God. We must love one another as Christ has loved us. We must be one as the Father and the Son are one. The message is not that sickly sentimental call away from conflict that we often hear in the competition of cultures and ideas, “Why can’t we all just get along.” Getting along is not enough. Observe that the Soviet Union had a unity of control lacking in today’s Russian society. Authoritarian uniformity is not the ideal that Paul raises. He affirms difference in the congregation. It’s ok for the body to contain a diversity of gifts and experience if they come together in harmonious service to God. The integrity of the body of Christ is made of maturity of faith “speaking the truth in love,” not sameness.

In the musical motif with which we began, the church is like the Grace Chorale. We are to live as we sing in harmony with God and with one another. We are not a collection of solo voices, each singing our own song, and we are not required to always sing in unison. We are a chorus of different voices and voice-parts lifted in harmonious praise to God. Sometimes a dissonant chord is needed. If some are off key, if some voices are high and others low, if some sing loud and others soft, and if some sing silently within their souls, it’s ok. As we have pledged to each other: “We will live in harmony with one another respecting the diversity of our Christian experience with no expectation that we shall walk in lockstep or wear a theological uniform.”