

# A Singing People

sermon digest

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Colossians 3:1-3, 12-16

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We returned last night from an overnight visit to Kentucky to participate in a meeting of Friends of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. To state it more clearly, perhaps I should say Friends of the *Former* Southern Baptist Seminary. Begun several years ago, the group consists of former students, teachers, and staff, many or most of whom are in retirement or semi-retirement. We gathered out of our grief for that we have lost but in a sense of continued faithfulness to passing on the gifts bestowed upon us during our years in that place. Our time together involved a lot of laughter, shared stories of good times and some good, courageous people, and testimonies of how the time spent in that place and among those people changed us forever. This year's gathering focused upon Martin Luther King's visit to the campus in 1961 to speak in chapel and the churning events his presence there set off among Southern Baptists. A host of letters ensued—some were threatening, although we were pleased to learn, more were supportive. Some churches did cut off funds for the seminary, and we all chuckled on hearing again the familiar story of the seminary president challenging ethics professor Henlee Barnette: "Do you know how much King's visit cost the seminary?" Tongue-in-cheek, Barnette in his characteristic way reassured the president, "It was money well-spent!"

Doug Smith, a former seminary music professor, brought for accompaniment of the hymns we sang, recordings of the hymns played on the seminary's pipe organ—a reminder of the magnificent music that literally rattled the chapel windows. We ended with communion and a moment we approached with mixed feelings—singing the Seminary Hymn, "Soldiers of Christ, in Truth Arrayed"—words written a couple of generations ago by then president of the seminary, Basil Manly. We were moved again by the familiar words, reminding us of the task of letting "light upon the darkness break" and the reassurance that "Seed-times of tears have oft been found With sheaves of joy and plenty crowned." As had been the case over the years, the music gathered our spirits and called us to common purpose. Music has a way of doing that. It calls us beyond ourselves, molding us into purposeful, believing, active community.

**Music is our thankful prayer to God.** Our faith is a singing faith, and it has been from its earliest beginnings. Songs and instruments reverberate throughout Hebrew Scripture from Miriam's and Moses' songs celebrating God's deliverance at the Exodus to the hallelujah chorus of the Book of Revelation. David, renown for his singing, strums upon his harp to soothe a raging Saul. Hannah sings in lament of her barrenness and breaks into joyful song upon the promise of a child. Second Isaiah anticipates that laments alongside the waters of Babylon will give way to exultant hymns of joy in which even the hills, the streams of water, the beasts of the field and the trees will join. The Psalms, Israel's hymn book, resounds with songs of lament, protest, and praise. (Can you even imagine worship services today apart from Psalms' strong chords of praise?) Sometimes, *often* times Israel's praise is offered in the midst of pain and expressed in trust and anticipation of God's strengthening presence and sure deliverance. Psalm 22 begins in the depths of despair, crying "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It moves to praising the holiness and historic faithfulness of God and voices anticipation of worship "in the midst of the congregation"—worship which will extend to include "the ends of the earth" and generations yet unborn. Throughout Psalms the injunction to sing a new song to God is repeated again and again, with the entire book building to its final and resounding doxology:

Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise God in his mighty firmament! Praise God for his mighty deeds; praise God according to his surpassing greatness! Praise God with trumpet sound . . . with lute and harp . . . with tambourine and dance . . . with strings and pipe . . . with loud and clanging cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

From the Magnificat of Mary to the Benedictus of Zechariah to the song of the angels and the songs of the aged Simeon and Anna, the Gospel of Luke couches his story of Jesus' birth in the songs of the *anawim*—the songs of *the poor ones*. John opens his Gospel with the magnificent hymn to the Word of God enfleshed in Jesus. Paul and Silas sing at midnight in prison. Paul utilizes early Christian hymns (1 Corinthians 13 and Philippians 2) in his writings, and letters traditionally ascribed to Paul command the singing of "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians and Colossians). The Book of Revelation resounds with majestic music, providing us with the formative words of the familiar hymn of worship, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

We were born into a singing people, and we have been singing ever since. Perhaps you remember the experience of singing with the congregation in worship as a young child. I recall singing hymns at the age

of 4 or 5 before I could even read, and on one occasion my sister and her friends looking around and laughing at me as I held the hymnal upside down and sang at the top of my lungs. Such experiences, pastor and musician Carolyn Winfrey Gillette suggests, are significant for small children too often in our day kept out of worship. Although they may not grasp everything that is done or said intellectually, they can and do grasp the sense of being a part of a caring, singing, loving church; and it communicates volumes of grace to their young lives. When we come before God in worship, Gillette suggests, we do more than merely think or talk with one another.

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 [*"Why We Sing," Christian Reflections, 18:15*].

Music is our thankful prayer to God. It involves our heads, our intellect—yes. But it also involves our hearts, our entire beings in rendering a gift of joy and praise to the God who has come among us in love.

**Music helps us to develop and grow as a people of God.** Music has been central to who we are and who we are becoming as Grace Covenant Church. I have been appreciative of Rodney's careful selection of the music to develop the focus of our worship each week. I am also appreciative of the wide diversity of music that we share. Larry and I led a worship service for the extended family gathering we attended in Virginia a couple of weeks ago. Larry's brother commented on one of the hymns we selected, suggesting it did not look like it came out of a Baptist hymnal. I answered that it did not and went on to explain that we do not use a single hymnal in worship but draw from a wide selection of hymns. Yes, our hymns come from the Methodists and Presbyterians and United Church of Christ and Disciples and more! In a church seeking to be interdenominational and representative of the diversity and wideness of Christ's church, it is more than appropriate that we do so. More, it opens to us a wealth of new hymns, new words, new expressions of our faith welcoming us to grow into the wideness of God's love in Christ.

Hymns instruct us and broaden and deepen our faith. Before printing presses existed, the church's hymns were a vital means of instruction in the faith. They still are. Remember the ABC song and the song intoning the list of books in the Bible? And perhaps you have noticed the frequent and consistent use of song on Sesame Street to teach basic concepts and appropriate codes of behavior? If we are honest, we are also more likely in church to remember the words that we sing with our hearts and voices than we are to remember words that we only hear or read. We, in the words of an issue of *Christian Reflection*, "sing our lives." We sing the things that matter most, the things that bind us to one another.

Music by its very nature is social, communal. It reaches out, drawing and involving others in the song. Music arises out of our relationship with God and one another, and it strengthens that relationship. Joy by its very nature is a response that cannot ultimately be contained and held closely to ourselves. It is an emotion that spills over and grows in its sharing. The joy and praise of worship builds and strengthens community. "When we sing together as a congregation," Gillette goes on to suggest, we are affirming the very central conviction of faith that God is still active among us.

The songs we sing . . . teach us what it means to be the Church, and they connect us to the Church in ways that spoken words cannot easily do. Hymns and songs sung together can remind us that we are not in this alone; we are part of a community of faith. God calls us to live in community. We are not solos; we are part of a choir—a congregation" [*Christian Reflections, 18:15*].

As such, congregational singing is necessarily active. It is not about passive observation but decided participation. "WORSHIP," the widely respected Robert Webber was fond of saying, "IS A VERB. It is not something done to us or for us, but by us" [*Worship Is a Verb, 1992, 2*]. In our shared singing, we take responsibility not just for our own experience, but that of others. Together we raise a song of praise to God. Together we seek to resolve one another's sense of pain and loneliness. Together we resolve to care for one another and the world that God loves.

So, sing on Grace Covenant. Sing as if your hearts and the hearts of brothers and sisters whom you love and for whom you accept responsibility depend on it. Sing to the best of your ability; and if your abilities are limited, sing anyway. Sing so that the words you sing may sink deeply within you and shape you for the week to come. Sing so that the words you sing may move through you and from you into a world desperately in need of your song, your hope, your vision. Amen.