

The One Who Sings, Prays Twice

Texts: Acts 16:22-33, Psalm 150

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At the church where I grew up in Beverly, New Jersey, there was a banner that hung in the sanctuary right by where the choir sat that read, “He who sings, prays twice.” As someone who was raised singing in the choir, having joined the youth choir when I was just 6 years old, that banner resonated with me. Being a child, there was a positive feeling in reading that banner, thinking that I was praying twice when I sang. Perhaps I was just keeping score – since I was the only one of my siblings who sang in choirs – and the youngest as well, so any edge that I could hold over them was always to my advantage. However, when you think about it, singing and music can be a form of prayer. Many of the hymns and worship songs that we sing on Sundays were written in the form of a prayer. Some were written as part of the songwriter’s journey in prayer and in life. Hymns and worship songs are rich, filled with cries and our fervent prayers.

On many Sundays here, I find that the songs and hymns that are chosen and sung speak to my heart, speak to a need that I have, speak to a struggle or a time of lament that I have been experiencing. Music is an integral part of our worship experience together, and I am so thankful that we have been able to include – and improve upon – the music while doing this virtual worship since the beginning of the pandemic.

What do the Scriptures say about music, singing, and hymns and songs? This morning, we are going to look at three Scriptures to see what they say and how we can respond in our attempts to live faithful lives for God through Jesus Christ. In the opening Scripture that we read to prepare our hearts for worship, we have these beautiful words from the apostle Paul to the Colossian Church. “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit,

singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

The one who sings lets the message of Christ dwell richly inside their hearts and minds. The one who sings uses the song to teach and admonish the body of Christ. The one who sings uses the hymn as wisdom to draw others closer to Christ. The one who sings does so with gratitude in their hearts. Have you ever thought about how music teaches us, admonishes us, reveals wisdom to us as we grow in our faith in God? How does this transform your Sunday morning singing in worship? Even if you are singing by yourself in your home, how can the hymns and songs more fully speak the message of Christ, draw you into a spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving, and teach or admonish?

Thinking more about this, it would be easy to use music and song as a means to cut people down. Certainly, we know that spoken words can do a number on someone. When we see the word admonish, it is easy to let our minds go that way. However, the temptation to use lyrics and song to break down should go away when we remember verse 17 – that whatever we do, in word or deed – I would also add in song too – should be done in Jesus’ name, giving thanks to God. So even if we were to use songs and hymns to admonish, it is to be done as Jesus would do – being faithful to God and loving to neighbor.

How else then are we to regard songs and music? We come to the first Scripture reading from the book of Acts, which Jen read. Paul and Silas have been thrown into prison and are shackled. This is, of course, after they have been flogged and severely beaten. Wounds are fresh, pain is real. They have been placed in the inner cell and their feet bound by the stocks. Most of us would probably be feeling really low at this point – crying and weeping about our state of being. Notice what Paul and Silas are doing. “About midnight Paul and Silas were

praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Was anyone expecting that? They are hurting – they are bound – but they are praying and singing hymns to God. “Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah...Come Christians join to sing, Alleluia, Amen.”

That does not fit, does it?

However, Paul and Silas’ witness to the other prisoners watching is that they will sing and pray to God amidst their troubles, their pain, and their uncertainty. What is our witness to others in these times of our lives? Do we have a song on our lips and in our hearts? Do we sing and pray when we are down, or afraid, or experiencing trouble? Do we sing when we are bound?

It is in these times when the power and presence of God comes through the loudest and clearest. I am reminded of Horatio Spafford, lawyer and Presbyterian elder who lived in the 1800’s. Following a horrific accident where the steamship upon which his wife and four daughters were traveling hit another vessel and the four daughters were killed, Spafford wrote the beautiful song lyrics, “When peace like a river attendeth my way. When sorrows like sea billows roll...It is well, it is well with my soul.” During and following tragedy, Spafford sang.

This weekend, I watched the movie based on the life of Bart Millard, who is the lead singer of the Christian group MercyMe. He was raised by an abusive father who after being diagnosed with cancer, got right with God and God’s forgiveness transformed him and his relationship with Bart. This prompted Bart to write the wonderful song “I Can Only Imagine.” Music does this for us. It gives us a connection to God that is, at times, more intimate than spoken or silent prayer. I think this is maybe the message the banner in my childhood church was trying to profess. The one who sings from these depths, prayers are multiplied.

Finally, we come to our Psalm – 150. “Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his might heavens.” Praise God with everything and everywhere. Praise God with

all kinds of musical instruments – loud and louder. Praise God with the dance. Now I know we as Presbyterians are not dancing in the aisles of the sanctuary, and I have never observed you dancing in your living rooms from home. But our prayers of praise to God can be expressed in that way too.

When we sing praises to God, we are praying a prayer of thanks and praise to God. We are lifting up our voice and our hands in song to praise the God of the vast universe. This brings to mind for me the song “Better Than A Hallelujah.” “We pour out our miseries, God just hears a melody. Beautiful the mess we are. The honest cries of breaking hearts are better than a hallelujah.” Praise God in all times and seasons. Or the powerful hymn, “How Great Thou Art.” “Then sings my soul, my Savior God to me, how great Thou art.” Praising God for how great He is – for His love and faithfulness. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Each one of us is capable and encouraged to sing praises to God with our breaths – with our voices in song.

In this Psalm, there is some repetition – lots of Praise God for this and that. Sometimes our songs are repeated or we sing the same few words over and over again. For some, this is probably tedious, but I think it is important. Sometimes our praise needs to be said and sung over and over again. Sometimes our prayer is just “Lord, help me. Help me. Help me. Help.” Praise and calling on God over and over is part of our walk with Christ.

Friends, let us sing songs of praise. Let us take the time to praise God – to cry out to God – to use our songs to teach and encourage. Let us be one who through our singing, pray over and over. Let us pray...

O God, we sing our songs of praise to You. We sing our cries of lament, sadness, and pain. We sing everything else in between. Help our singing and our prayers draw us closer to You, reminding us of how You are with us and how You love us. May our music, individually and collectively, be the melody of Your heart. In Christ’s name, Amen.