

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Second Sunday of Easter- April 11, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 150 & Revelation 1:4-8

GIVE GLORY TO GOD

Covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, gossip, sexual perversion- at the end of the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, St. Paul lists these and others in a striking inventory of the world's moral failings. More remarkable is his diagnosis of the root of the problem. Why is there so much bad behavior and deficient moral character in our world?

Is it because we're ignorant? Is it because we're driven by selfish genes? Is it because we're warped by poor upbringings?

Paul says it's because we give glory to ourselves, or to the things of this world, or to our own creations that we should give only to God. We sing songs of glory- doxologies- to creatures that should be sung only to the Creator.

In other words, bad behavior and flawed character flow from misguided worship. They stem from singing heartfelt songs of praise to gods that are false and therefore unworthy of them. If we direct our worship the wrong way, the next thing we know we're wallowing in moral chaos. The connection between the way we sing and the way we live is intimate.

The word *liturgy* means literally "the work of the people". The liturgy we do here on Sunday mornings is basic to our work as *people of God*. It shapes and energizes what we do Monday through Saturday. As Paul says elsewhere, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Colossians 3:17). Our Sunday liturgies ready us to glorify God Monday through Saturday in everything we sing, say, and do. That's the Christian rhythm.

It keeps us moving with the true God, the One who is love, the One we know in Jesus Christ and who alone is worthy of worship. That's the key. We keep our worship directed to God and God alone because when we start singing tacky tunes of glory to ourselves or to anyone or anything else is when we go off-key and get lost.

We rightly call this Sunday gathering a *service* of worship. It's service we do that directs us to God and not to ourselves. It centers us in God so that we can live in, with, and through God's love in everything we sing, say, and do Monday through Saturday.

I think this is especially challenging in our time and place. There's a lot in our wider culture that encourages us to be relentlessly *self*-centered. How am I feeling, how am I doing, what's going on with me, what good can I get out of this for me? We're steadily urged to take our psychic temperature, to judge everything on the basis of the ever sensitive me.

Swept along in this kind of current, I can, for example, be tempted when I'm singing a hymn or listening to an anthem to say, "Now, wait a minute. I don't like this song. It's not doing anything for me." To which the proper, worshipful response is always, "Who cares? This song is not being sung for me. It's being sung for God."

As St. Augustine said, when we sing we doubly direct ourselves to God. We "pray twice", praising our Maker with both words and music. Here in springtime, we especially note that God is a great lover of music. God has created not one bird to sing, but millions- millions upon millions of soaring creatures who, day after day, sing on.

Then there are the waves. They beat their song endlessly upon the shore. There's the wind that rustles through the leaves and the water that thunders over the falls. The book of Psalms speaks of the trees clapping their hands and of the whole world coming alive in acclamation of God. Singing on Sunday morning we join our voices in praise to God, praise that resounds throughout this doxological planet.

*To You, O God, all creatures sing, and all creation, everything sings Your praises, alleluia! Your burning sun with golden beam, Your silver moon with softer gleam sing Your praises, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.*

The whole cosmos throbs with rhythm and harmony. It pulses with the sound and sense of music. The beating of our hearts and the breathing of our lungs connect us primordially with beat, rhythm, and syncopation. We long for harmony, not just in music, but in our lives. We yearn for the sense that everything is “in synch”, that at every level the whole chorus of creation is singing in glorious harmony.

Music goes very deep in us. Ponder all the songs and melodies that can stir your soul. Is there a lullaby in your personal history, a song that is your romantic song, a tune that rouses your love for your spouse, your child, your parents, or your family, a melody that kindles your best for your friends, your school, your team, your country, your fellow human beings, this earth, life itself, and, above all, God? Music goes deep, inspiring our sense of who we really are and what truly matters.

In Alex Haley’s great story, *Roots*, Kunta Kinte lies on the dirt floor of the slave cabin in this “New World” to which he’s been brought from Africa. The pit of slavery has nearly wiped out any memory he’s had of his native land, any sense of who he had been there as a free person *until* . . . until one night when he hears a woman singing. She sings a tune that’s strange but irresistible to him. It’s a song from Africa and it awakens long suppressed memories in him. He suddenly remembers his native home and who he has been. He weeps for joy in rediscovering himself through this music.

On Sunday, as we praise God with our songs we hear *our* names called in them. We sing and remember, “Yes, God’s people- that’s who we are and are meant to be.” When Paul urges the Colossian Christians to let the word of God “dwell in (them) richly,” he names not only preaching and teaching, but music, too, as primary means for letting God’s word have its way with us (Col. 3:16). Singing Scripture burrows it deep inside of us. We can’t hear it sung, for instance, in Handel’s *Messiah*, without our souls being made new.

*“And he shall reign forever and ever. King of kings and Lord of lords, King of kings and Lord of lords. And he shall reign forever and ever . . .”*

Worshiping with music moves us to the heart of what God in Christ wants to do with us. The Spirit longs to convert us, to change us so that we begin to desire what God desires, so that we start to see everything as God sees it- as beloved creation that’s moving closer and closer to the great and final shout of praise that is the kingdom of God. As we praise God in Christ, the Spirit forms us into God’s likeness. Paul says it’s like seeing the glory of the Lord reflected in a mirror and through that reflection we ourselves are transformed into the same image, from one degree of glory to another (II Cor. 3:18).

The connection between the way we sing and the way we live *is* intimate. The better we get at praising God on Sunday, the better we become at praising God Monday through Saturday. We start to know our worship “by heart” so that we become it. Our Monday through Saturday lives become hymns of praise through which we share at home and at school and at work and in our communities the same love that God has for us.

That’s why Judy and Barbara take such care in choosing the music that we sing and listen to here. They realize that over time we take on the likeness of what we worship. They understand that the images of God which take the deepest hold in us in these services are likely *not* the ones that come to us through the praying, reading, preaching, and teaching, important though those are, but through the music.

Since a church is always being either formed or deformed by the substance of its worship, Barbara and Judy know that in selecting our hymns and anthems it’s crucial to ask not only, “Does the congregation or choir like this one?” or “Is it set to music that suits our tastes?” but even more, “Who is the God being praised in this song?” and “What sort of disciples will we become by singing or listening to this?”

*“Take my life, God, let it be consecrated faithfully. Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.”*

If you’ve been here for very long, you’ll have noticed that much of our music, especially in our hymn book, comes to us from centuries ago- sometimes many centuries. We use contemporary music, too, which is necessary, right, and good, and yet, as Christians, music from our earlier times always has a privileged place as well. That’s because we’re involved in a communion of saints that takes us all the way back to Jesus and before Jesus to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

We’re included in something so much bigger than ourselves and our current scene. We’re part of an ancient, global, cosmic, and heavenly community that calls us to understand that God has not left us

merely to the devices of our own small and narrow present. Instead, the whole company of God's people, from time immemorial, is with us singing us on. We have, for example, Saints Francis and Bach and Watts and Vaughn Williams to support and guide us. We have Martin Luther to help us sing, "A mighty fortress is our God." We don't have to scratch and claw and figure everything out for ourselves. The communion of saints is with us to inspire us, to enrich us, and to lead us on.

Speaking of music that goes way back, today's Scripture from the book of Revelation gives us a hymn, too. Its poetry speaks of the one who has "glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen." Revelation is actually among the Biblical books that are most often quoted in the church's historic liturgies. Its first chapter and much of the rest of it are best understood as songs or as hymns.

Chapter one sings of heaven, of God's kingdom come, as the place of the best songs, ones in which not only the saints gather around God's throne, but all of God's creatures. All those who make music in the earth, the sea, and the sky, the whole kit and caboodle of creation come together to sing praise to the Lamb enthroned above.

Mark Twain once said that if heaven is an endless choir rehearsal, he'd gladly pass on it. To that, I'd say first that he never had a chance to sing in the Haslett Community Church choir, in which case I'm sure he'd have sung a different tune. But, furthermore, he didn't realize that, as Revelation says, we've been created for praise. From the first beating of our hearts and the first breathing of our lungs, God has made us to join in creation's song.

On that great and final day to which Revelation points everything that keeps us from singing- pain, heartache, shame, machismo, disease, injustice, oppression, whatever- all that conspires to choke off our voices and silence creation's song, will be defeated by God. The Lamb whose birth set the angels to singing will enable all of us to sing full, free, and fair. Every voice will be healed, renewed, and liberated. The saints on earth and the saints in heaven, all of God's people and creatures everywhere, will lift our voices as one. In everything we sing, say, and do, we'll at last be in harmony with the truth for which we've been made from the start. We will give worship, honor, power, glory, and blessing to the One who alone is worthy of our praise. "To the Lamb be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen!"

The choir then sings:

*Crown with your richest crowns the Lamb upon the throne; Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own. Awake, my soul and sing of Christ who died for you, And to your risen Savior bring your thanks for life made new.*

*Crown Christ who holds the years, embracing space and time, Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime: All hail, Redeemer, hail! For you have died for me; Your praise shall never, never fail throughout eternity.*

Kurt Kirchoff

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Great and glorious God, we praise You for Your almighty love shown to us in Jesus Christ. Because he never stopped loving his disciples even when they ran away and abandoned him to death; because he never stopped loving those who despised and rejected him even as they nailed him to the cross, we praise You. Because our crucifixion of Jesus could not stand in the way of Your devotion to us; because the power and persistence of Your love for us shine through in Your raising of Jesus from the dead, we praise You. Because by Christ's dying and rising we know that Your love cannot be defeated even by the worst that we can do; because by Your life with us in him, we know that nothing can ever separate us from Your love, we praise You.

With hearts full of thanksgiving, we ask You then to take our lives every day- in our work and our leisure, with our families and friends, with strangers and in all of our communities- take them and make them into pure songs of praise to You. In everything we sing and say and do, help us to give worship, honor, power, glory, and blessing to You who alone is worthy of worship. We pray this in Jesus' name and we pray as he has taught us, saying together, "Our Father. . ." Amen.