

God calls us to sing
Sermon preached at the church of St. Peter & St. Paul
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, April 24, 2016
Evensong, Psalm 96, Zephaniah 3:14-20, Colossians 3:12-17

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSV): Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.

Colossians 3:12-17 (NRSV): As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

I have a number of friends who have traveled to developing countries to do missionary work. Some went to Uganda or Tanzania in Africa, or Haiti or Honduras in Central America. One common thread that they bring back is how struck they were at the singing they encountered. The churches there, the communities of Christians, worship with great joy, singing God's praises together, sometimes in multiple harmonies. They don't use books or written music. These are songs that they know because they have learned them together, and all ages sing them together. Music and singing is such a powerful and essential element to their worship of God and their connection as a community.

What I find interesting is not the singing, but the shock on the part of the American missionaries. Westerners also have a heritage of music and community singing. We sang in the fields, we sang in church, we sang at home, we sang at meals and family gatherings. We learned songs as children and shared them as men and women in college and beyond. Now, somehow, we have lost so much of this tradition of singing. Now we seem to out-source our music and let others do the singing for us.

One illustration of this is in a bus ride with teenagers. Now it is more typical to see throughout the bus each teen plugged into individual mobile devices listening to music. But it wasn't that long ago that a long bus ride was a chance for the whole group to sing songs together, and enjoy laughter and camaraderie. This is a metaphor, I think, for our increasing self-isolation and disconnection from each other. And without that personal connection, we are reluctant to reach out to each other in heartfelt relationship. It is sort of like our reluctance to sing because we are too self-conscious about the quality of our singing.

Well, one thing I notice in Holy Scripture is that no one was ever identified as a *good* singer or a *bad* singer—they simply sang! They sang! Read what Zephaniah writes in his message from God: “*Sing aloud, O daughter Zion, shout, O Israel! Rejoice exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!*” He doesn’t say “pick out a few people who can sing for you!” He calls the whole people to sing God’s praises. Certainly, scripture identifies leaders of music—those who can help support and inspire the whole community to sing. But the singing is for everyone.

Not only does Zephaniah call us to sing, he tells us that God sings for us too. “[*The LORD*] will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.”

God gathers us as his people. He gives us each other in this community—and he gives us music and song to share together to help us pray and to fill us with joy.

Look at the New Testament reading to hear what God has done for us: God chose you. God forgives you. God’s love binds us together. God gives us the peace of Christ. God calls us to be one body. God gives us the word of Christ to dwell richly in us.

How can we not rejoice at what God has done for us? And God gives us music to help us pray and to help us rejoice. Paul writes “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.*”

Notice that this gift of music and this call to sing is an integral part of Paul’s call to unity and godly love for one another as a community. Paul writes “*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*” Speaking of harmony, in fact, we can learn more about being a Christian community through the example of singers in a choir.

Not that perfect singing is a requirement, but there is indeed great joy in learning to sing a piece well together. To be an effective ensemble, a choir is not a group of skilled soloists. An effective ensemble must put into practice the virtues that Paul extols. It takes humility and meekness to listen to the other singers. Listening is so crucial to creating an effective blend of voices and communicating a piece of music together. One cannot listen to others if one is too self-focused. In learning a complicated piece of music, it takes humility and patience with yourself and patience with others as well. A good singing ensemble bears with one another in love and forgiveness, seeking to build each other up. And in careful ways, the choir teaches each other and admonishes in all wisdom and kindness, growing and learning from others in the group.

Choirs also do their work together, singing as a whole group, and not as a mass of individuals. So we in the church ought also to see our ministries as part of a whole. Just as a choir focuses on the guidance of the director, so also we focus on Jesus, paying close attention to God’s guidance and direction in our lives both as individuals and as a church.

We may not be used to working together or seeking to find harmony. We may not be used to looking for a common direction in our ministries. Living as a community calls us out of our

individualism to be part of a larger body. But in that gathering, we will find and share God's blessing.

God gathers us as his people. He gives us each other in this community—and he gives us music and song to share together to help us pray and to fill us with joy, and to teach us more about growing as disciples of Jesus Christ.

So, my friends, as your rector, let me proclaim to you God's commandment to sing! Sing his praises! Sing your prayers and with gratitude build each other up with love and commitment and song. God gives us each other in the church and God gives us music and song to share together to help us to pray and to fill us with joy!

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”