

Singing for our lives

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Exodus 15:1; 2 Chronicles 5:13; Psalm 95:1; Psalm 98:1-7; Psalm 150:1-5;
Luke 1:46-55; Colossians 3:16c; Revelation 5:11-14

In early July I joined many of you for a Sunday morning worship service held at the Kansas City Convention Center. This was not my normal Sunday morning worship experience. It was the closest experience I've had to a Mennonite mega church service. Not only where there thousands of Mennonites worshipping together in the same place, there was large stage area with drums, electric guitars, two large screens. I think there was even a fog machine. I felt a little lost. I didn't know where to look and I couldn't hear my own voice, let alone the voice of the person next to me. At one point we were singing a song that I had never heard before and so I just focused on the lyrics that were on the big screen. Well, that sort of made me feel even more lost because I didn't really understand what we were saying about God. Just when I was about to sink into a bad mood I realized that standing in front of me was the sign language interpreter. I suddenly felt like I had the best seat in the room. The interpreter moved so joyfully and effortlessly. I paid less attention to the music, the sounds, the words I was hearing and more to her expression, her movement, her joy.

That memory came back to me as we just sang this song written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. Did you pay attention to the final stanza from "All the Music Sung and Played Here"?

Bless the talents we are bringing, for we offer you our best. If our gifts are not in singing, may our joyful noise be blest. If our world is ever silent, may we sign to you above. Touched by grace, may each one present offer back your song of love.

This is a good reminder that not everyone hears or experiences music, or rhythm, or tone in the same way. Some do not hear at all, and yet surely we all have the ability to experience God's song of love. Surely each of us has a way to offer our own unique song of love back to God.

I have the good fortune most Sundays of watching different ones of you experience music. Each Sunday I see those who are clearly moved by the music. I watch as people smile and sometimes shed tears. Sometimes I watch as parents help their young children follow along stanza by stanza, or I see Diane lean into her husband so she can listen to him sing the words. I can tell that she knows many of the hymns we sing by heart.

There are also those among us who don't read music, or who are tone deaf. Not everyone bursts out in song. It's kind of like going to sports events. When they play the national anthem, there are those who get really into it, hand on heart, and there are others who look down uncomfortably, or gaze around the room.

We all have different responses to and experiences with music. I know someone in Goessel, KS who only comes to worship for the sermon and then leaves. He knows other people in his church who treat music the same way—they come for the songs, and leave for the sermon. So in this church you have congregational members crossing paths in the foyer while the service is happening.

There is no denying that within the Bible there is a call to come into God's presence with songs. There is also no denying the fact that at other points in scripture, there are some rather scathing remarks made about worship and the place of music within worship. The prophet Amos, for example, critiques those who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, or those who like David improvise on instruments of music, drinking wine from bowls, anointing themselves with the finest oils, all the while not grieving over the destruction all around them. Take Amos 5:21, for example: *I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Through the centuries the people of God have fought a lot over what noise is Godly noise and which instruments belong in the house of worship. Even so called peace-loving Mennonites have had their share of fights over music. Some Mennonites grew up in settings where the only instrument allowed was the voice and so a cappella singing was the most Godly form of music-making. Other instruments were seen as worldly, not to be worshiped.

Others of us grew up valuing instrumentation of all kinds, maybe especially the organ. "The organ," writes John Allen Bankson, "is a wind instrument like the human voice. It is a collection of wind instruments all in one place (reeds, flutes, trumpets, etc)." Many believe that the organ is the best human made instrument for supporting congregational singing because the organ itself is made up of choirs. The various choirs, or ranks or families of pipes that make up the organ provide this amazing arrange of tone colors and moods and textures. ("Bring back the organ!")

Still others of us grew up with and perhaps prefer praise songs and worship leaders who lead with drums, electric guitars, and song lyrics on screens.

We all have our own church music stories.

Over the years, I have tried to reflect a little more about my own journey with church music, and I've tried to be self-critical. That is, I've tried to look at my own experience as important, but not treat that as normative. And I've tried at various points to write out a list of what I value in church music and reflect on some of the pitfalls or blind spots when it comes to church music. I'm still developing that list. So rather than giving you a list this morning, I've decided to share three musings about church music for us to consider.



John Bell is a Church of Scotland minister and member of the Iona Community. Many of the songs we sing from *Sing the Journey* were written by Bell.

Musing #1

Several weeks ago I talked about how many of us have these snapshots of God that go unchanged. We have this picture of God, and we put that picture in a frame, and that's the picture for all time. Same goes for our image of Jesus. Contemporary hymn writers like John Bell argue that we have such a slim canon of images of Jesus. I heard him say once that so many of the hymns/songs we sing present a passive image of Jesus. Every time we sing *Away in a manger* at Christmas, for example, Bell cringes at this thought of Jesus, "no crying he makes."

Bell wants to jump out of his chair and ask whether Jesus is ok. "A child really should cry," he said. So many of the old hymns talk about Jesus birth and his death. What about songs about his life? We need, Bell argues, a plurality of images of God, and we need hymns and songs that present Jesus as the prophetic figure that he was. I'm particularly grateful for the hymns of the church that are geared more to protest, songs that name violence, greed, the powers that be that keep us from being all we can be.

Musing #2

Songwriters like John Bell wish that we had more songs in the church about disorientation. In a lecture I heard him give once he said that for the pastoral good of God's people we should give as much importance occasionally, not as much prominence, but as much importance to the songs of disorientation, as we do the songs of joy. To name our different experiences of disorientation, he said, in the company of other people allows us to be the Body of Christ where we feel for each other's pain and share each other's joy. The purpose of our singing, he said, isn't just to let us feel good or to let God know this is the way we feel, the purpose is to allow the whole body of Christ- those who weep as well as those who dance, to be presented before their maker.

I remember back to one December not so long ago. It seemed like all we were doing in the church was singing songs of joy and new birth, and yet there I was grieving an ill-defined diagnosis of infertility. I remember going to a chapel service and singing a hymn called "God of Eve and God of Mary," a hymn I had never sung before (HWB #492). Listen to Stanza 3: "Thank you for belonging, shelter, bonds of friendship, ties of blood, and for those who have no children, yet are parents under God."

At that point my husband and I were keeping that pain pretty private, and so it meant all the more to me to feel as if the singing congregation was praying and aching with us. I have found only a few hymns that mention reproductive loss and I treasure each one of them. I think it was Augustine who said that singing is like praying twice. It is important that the songs we sing reflect our ups and downs, our experiences of loss, disorientation, and new life.

Here is my third and final musing about church music:

I have had the honor of sitting next to many people as they have taken their final breath. I have joined many a family as they felt the life not only go out of their loved ones, but as they felt their own life leaving their body, leaving them weak, barely able to move.

Sometimes these end of life moments are chaotic, sometimes they are full of silence, and sometimes music is involved. I know that David Wiebe, a church member who died this week, asked for music during his final days. He not only requested a lot of Willie Nelson, he wanted to hear the hymns of his childhood. He wanted to connect again to his Mennonite heritage of singing four part harmony. For many, not all, but for many hymns have a way of connecting us with a wider community, perhaps the heavenly community. Hymns sometimes connect us to something larger than words alone can. Hymns, many have told me, remind us that we are not alone. We are part of a larger community, a larger cloud of witnesses.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette speaks beautiful about this in an article "Why we Sing." She says that a woman told her once that when her husband was dying she and her grown children gathered around his bedside. Together they sang the hymns and songs of the church that had meant so much to them. They sang for hours, sometimes singing from the hymnbook sometimes singing from memory. "One by one," Gillette writes, "they moved from singing to gentle, holy silence, until only the woman was singing to her husband." She sang, "What Wondrous Love is this HWB #530)." The last stanza goes like this: *And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on. And through eternity, I'll sing on.*

Her husband died as she sang these words to him. His wife felt as though at that moment that he became part of some divine mysterious heavenly chorus, singing through eternity.

In a moment we will sing this song. First I want us to consider these questions:

How would you answer the question: Why sing? What place/importance does music have in our worship life? And more specifically, which church songs or instrumentation have been meaningful to you and why? Finally, what songs, if any, would you want offered to you as you breathe your last?

I wish we in the church spent more time talking about these questions. So let the conversations continue.