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Three Short Meditations on Music – Knowing God, Loving God, & Serving God Through Music – For “Hymn Sing Sunday”

I. Knowing God Through Music

(From Psalm 105:42-45) For God remembered his holy promise.... So he led forth his people with joy, his chosen ones with singing.... That they would keep God's statutes, and would know God's teachings. Praise the LORD!

Have you followed the news about those poor miners in Chile, trapped hundreds of feet down, inside that dark, tiny cavern? Have you read about what they are doing to keep themselves from going crazy, or maybe you have seen one of the videos? They're singing. Together they sang the Chilean national anthem and have also been singing what one news report called “religious songs.” Now, some would say that singing at a time such as this is simply one more way to help them feel better, to calm their emotions. The great Russian writer Leo Tolstoy said *“Music is the shorthand of emotion.”* An anonymous quotation I have seen many times says *“Music is what feelings sound like.”* It is sometimes said that music is about feelings and words are about truth – as these two quotes imply – but I believe that point of view just doesn't say **enough** and thereby makes a huge mistake.

For you see, one of the great untruths of our age is the way that seemingly absolute distinctions get made between head and heart, mind and emotion, rationality and feeling, intellect and affect. And then the proponents of each side line up and attempt to say that it is their “side” of things that is really real, really true and that the other “side” is wrong. You hear this kind of talk in the psychobabble that our culture so loves: *“Don't tell me what your head says, tell me what your gut says.”* Or, *“Oh, I don't like that classical music stuff; it's too 'heady'; country music is real music because its all about feelings.”* You know what I'm talking about. The proponents of “head” disparage

the holders of “heart” as fuzzy and emotional. The believers in music-as-emotion claim that a praise chorus is more “real” somehow than a Gregorian chant or a Bach mass.

The problem with this cultural untruth that divides head from heart, reason from emotion, and then insists that you must be 100% one or the other is that obscures the fact that music is indeed one of the central ways that we know God. For you see, those Chilean miners singing their national anthem aren’t just making themselves **feel** better, they are also **asserting** through song their belief and their understanding that their nation indeed cares for them and will free them. When they sing those “religious songs,” they’re not just trying to make themselves feel better but are expressing that they **know** that God is holding them and calling others to care for them. They are profoundly connecting what they **feel** with what they **think** - which is always the best way to know something!¹

Those first scientists, the ancient Greeks, knew that music must never be sundered into two separate realms of heart and head. The earliest musicians of the ancient world were also the earliest physicists and their insight was that music was one of the highest and best things of this world because it could both alter our state of being, our “feelings,” if you will, but it could do so because it was an expression of the physical laws at work in the universe. Music and physics were simply two sides of the same coin, and both were ways of expressing our knowledge of the world.

The classic hymn, “This Is My Father’s World,” this beautiful line in it: *“This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears, all nature sings and round me rings the music of the spheres.”* “The music of the spheres.” That’s not just a pretty phrase; no, it is a nod to the fact that at bottom music and physics, again, are different angles on the same thing. The equation that could graph a few bars of a beloved piece of music is not somehow more real than the sense that is evoked when hearing that music. To put

¹For this felicitous and apt turn of phrase, I am indebted to Rev. Barbara Blaisdell.

it more simply, music is itself a way of knowing things, and more to our point this morning, of knowing God. When we hear, when we sing, the intricate and complex and beautifully structured strains of Beethoven's "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" we are expressing our **knowledge** of God's good ordering of this world. And when we hear Mahalia Jackson run a spine-tingling improvisational riff on "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" we are reminded of the fact that God is not just a God of order – because order without intensity is boredom – but is also a God of the novel and the intense, the one who seeks to make all things new. Psalm 26 says it this way "I... go [to your house,] O LORD, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, ...telling all thy wondrous deeds." Music indeed tells of God's wondrous deeds in the same way a sermon or a theological tract can. Music is not just a way of feeling, but a way of knowing. And feeling is always a way of knowing and, to recur to the title of our introit this morning, "when in our music God is glorified," then indeed we know, we know, through both notes and words who God is.

II. Loving God Through Music

(Ephesians 5b :18-20) ...be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Earlier this week I was reading one of the religious blogs online that I sometimes read as part of my regular devotional reading. The blog had published a letter from someone who was very unhappy with some of his church's new music selections.

Here's what the letter writer said:

I am no music scholar, but I feel I know appropriate church music when I hear it. Last Sunday's new hymn - if you can call it that - sounded like a sentimental love ballad one would expect to hear crooned in a [bar]. If you insist on exposing us

to rubbish like this - in God's house! - don't be surprised if many of the faithful look for a new place to worship. The hymns we grew up with are all we need.

Another correspondent had a similar point of view and said this in his letter:

What is wrong with the inspiring hymns with which we grew up? When I go to church, it is to worship God, not to be distracted with learning a new hymn. Last Sunday's was particularly unnerving. The tune was un-singable and the new harmonies were quite distorting.

Are some of you wincing because you so very much disagree? But are some of you saying to yourselves, "Yeah! Right on! Preach it, brother!"? And whether you agree or not to these writers' thoughts, would it change or chasten your opinion to know that the first letter, the one complaining about the new hymn's "sentimental rubbish," was written in 1863 and the song was "Just As I Am"? Or that the second writer, who thought that last Sunday's hymn choice was "un-singable" and who longed for the "hymns we grew up with," wrote his letter in 1890 about the song "What A Friend We Have In Jesus"?²

Or take the organ. In the latter half of the 1800s there was a blistering fight in the Disciples of Christ movement about the use of the organ that makes some of our fights today look quite tame. One anti-organ writer called the organ a "disturber of the peace." Another Disciples leader of that era called for "warfare, stern, relentless, merciless, exterminating warfare against" the organ.³

Such thoughts, whether they were expressed in 1875 about the organ or in 2010 about "that new music" or guitars and drums or praise choruses makes me sad. But it is the embarrassed sadness of self-recognition. For in the mid-90s, when I was younger and stupider, I said to the newly hired, incredibly talented, deeply spiritual,

²http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2008/07/the-controverci.html

³<http://www.therestorationmovement.com/unity1.htm> The first quote is from H. Leo Boles and the second two is from J.W. McGarvey.

twenty-something music director at Barbara's church in California, *"If I never hear another praise chorus in my life I'll be happy."* Instead of simply pitying me, as would have been his right, this wise young man said to me *"Then you will miss out on a lot of love."* And he was right; I would have. For I slowly but surely came to realize that whether the song was "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," or whether it was the then-contemporary praise songs of "Our God is an Awesome God" or "Let It Rise," ***in each case those making the music were seeking to express their love for God.*** And that's the point: no one ever composes or selects or sings a song in worship because they want to annoy someone else. No, people sing their praises in all kinds of forms and meters and words and with all kinds of instruments because they want to express their love for God and what God has done for them and for this world. If you and I keep that in mind when a song is sung that is not to our taste, we will glorify God and we will strengthen and uplift those whose musical tastes are different from ours.

Because in the end, it's NOT about my taste or your taste, *it's about love.* And expressions of love differ. When, very early on in our marriage, I gave Barbara a vacuum cleaner for Valentines, she responded with a rule that I have wisely followed ever since: *"A romantic gift does not generally have to be plugged in."* At the same time she realized and acknowledged that my gift was at least an *attempt* to express my love for her. Now the good news is that I have grown, I think, in my ability to express that love to her, and I have grown in my willingness and ability to understand that a variety of forms of music can express love for God and can in turn draw people to God. For those things, I am very thankful.

III. Serving God Through Music

(Nehemiah 12:46-47a) For in the days of David and Asaph long ago there was a leader of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the daily portions for the singers....

Twenty-three hundred years ago, the Chinese philosopher Mencius said *"If the*

King loves music, it is well with the land.” At nearly the same time, but 5000 miles away, the Hebrew prophet Nehemiah, following the people’s return from their long exile in Babylon, re-instituted a practice – that went back to the time of King David – of employing Temple singers. In fact, this was so important to Nehemiah that every citizen in the land paid a daily tax to support these singers, whose sole job it was to sing to God. How very different than from our culture and society – and even, in some cases, the church – where too often music and art classes in schools, and music and art enrichment programs at the city parks for children, and employment opportunities for teachers of music and art are usually the first things to go when times are tough. The assumption seems to be that music and art are icing on life’s cake, fluff that is fun but dispensable.

But Mencius knew better: *“When the King loves music”* – that is to say, when music and the arts are valued and honored and seen as something essential instead of optional – *“then all is well in the land.”* And Nehemiah also knew better. For they both knew something about music that we forget at our peril, and that is this: Without music, without art, our children will not have the capacities for empathy, imagination, and justice that they otherwise could have. As Barbara pointed out to me this week, pioneering research studies, done first in the slums of East St. Louis and since repeated elsewhere, show that art and music expand the imagination of children and it is precisely in the imagination where compassion, and justice, and fairness are incubated and practiced.⁴ If you want our children – and the children of this community and this country – to practice fairness, justice, and compassion you must first give them the imagination for these things. And that is what happens when children are steeped in the creative arts. If we want our children to have the ability to care beyond

⁴Cf., e.g., <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1993.00001.x/abstract> I am grateful to the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell for this citation, as well as for some of her powerfully eloquent phrasings I’ve adapted in sermon’s last two paragraphs.

themselves, to see themselves as their brothers' and sisters' keepers, to know that God loves and values everyone He has made just as much as He does them, then the arts are not optional, they are essential. Musically-steeped children will be more inclined to see in their fellow humans the **commonalities** rather than the differences; they will, indeed, have so much more deeply embedded in their souls the capacity to love their neighbors as themselves.

In other words, we sing so that we can serve. For those who are being formed by music are the future IHN and ESM volunteers. Artistic-expanded imaginations will be the ones who will serve the Acacia Meals. It will be the children who were encouraged to sing who will someday serve as the elders who visit the homebound, taking joy in doing so. It will be those who were encouraged to let their childhood artistic imaginations run riot who will someday want to use their precious vacation times to go to Shiprock to care amidst horrible poverty or who will go to rebuild homes on the Gulf Coast or will give up a weekend to minister to migrants in the San Luis Valley. It is no accident that it will be the ones who as children learned to love the arts who will be among the first to stretch their wallets to help in the face of floods or tsunami or earthquake or hurricane when the lives of people they will never meet are devastated, but whom they know God loves just as much as them. We create so that we can care. We sing so that we can serve, we sing so that we can serve.