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First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
January 29, 2012 Chalice Hymnal and Chalice Praise Dedication Sunday
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Three Homilies

I. Who God Is

*Hymns: "We Gather Together," "For the Fruits of All Creation," Anthem:
"When In Our Music God is Glorified," "Creating God, Your Fingers Trace"*

What does God look like to you? I suspect that many of you have a mental image from childhood. I can still remember a toddler's picture book of Bible stories in which God was portrayed as an old man, tautly stretched white skin, stern of countenance and with a snow-white beard that was at least two feet long. I can still summon that image as if it were yesterday. But a decade ago, another image can to live in my mind, that of Morgan Freeman as God in the movie "Bruce Almighty," with his dignified and wise face, wrinkled under the cares of millions, kindly and yet sometimes crotchety in the face of His children's failings and foibles.

But that leads me to a second question, one more apt for this day: What does God **sound** like to you? That white-bearded man of my youngest days had no voice, but Morgan Freeman does: deep, sonorous, confident. But I once asked a ten-year-old what she thought God sounded like and she un-hesitatingly replied, "Mr. Rogers." When I asked her why, she said "he's never scary." I recall once coming across a teenager who wrote that for him "God sounded like children laughing" – playful, unafraid, delighted in the world.

Let's push a little further. What *music* sounds like God to you? For some it is those haunting first four notes of "How Great Thou Art" that have the power to oh-so-

viscerally return you to an occasion where was indeed a comfort to know that God is great. I know someone who says that Bach's Canon in D always makes her cry because she feels so close to God through it. The person who introduced me to the song "Just As I Am" was - don't laugh - Willie Nelson and its soaring last few measures indeed never fail to move me and indeed "sound like God" to me.

But did you know that one of the founders of the Disciples, Alexander Campbell, not only published one of the first Disciples hymnals in 1828 but also would never allow any musical notation in the hymnal, for he said that the music was un-important and a "*a distraction from the truth and power of the words.*"¹ But, to my mind, that is a silly distinction. For you see, indeed, God is glorified when our words truly honor who God is: when our words about God reflect the fact that God is no bully, that God is love unconditional, that God seeks our good only - but which sometimes also means that God judges us when we fall short, yet forgives us, and offers us a way to move forward. All of those are good words that indeed glorify God. But music and melody can also glorify, God. And please note: this is not a matter of new or old, classical or contemporary, for gorgeous and God-glorifying music can come in **every** style and form for at its essence such God-glorifying music is a *creative mixture of harmony and chaos*. The tune to "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" is **not** God-glorifying music because it is all harmony and utter placidity. On the other hand, the "music" I would make if I were to begin plunking on the piano would not be God-glorifying for it would be complete chaos.

But some music - be it classical or country, banjo or bassoon, chant or chimes -

¹Cited in The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement, page 409.

indeed strikes that God-glorifying perfect note of **both** harmony **and** chaos and thereby reflects and gives musical voice to the God who Himself hopes that there is not *too* much harmony – for that usually means injustice and inequity also thrive. It is the God who wants a little bit of chaos to get under our skins and make us dissatisfied with our lives if we are not living out God’s purposes, if we are too willing to settle for the mediocre instead of reaching for the best. But when in our music harmony and chaos fetchingly form *together* then the God who loves us just as we are – but loves us too much to ever leave us where we are – is indeed glorified.

II. Who We Are

Hymns: “We Call Ourselves Disciples,” “Santo, Santo, Santo

I am convinced that one of the reasons that we have music in worship is to remind us that we are embodied beings. We are not just about words and mind and doctrine and intellect, but we are also creatures who know the deepest joys and the most vexing frustrations of bodily life. In fact, the two things that are the most powerful in being able to immediately transport us back to an earlier time and place, almost viscerally, are indeed oh-so-bodily: music and smells. One of our daughters says that the whiff of a certain kind of perfume can immediately transport her back into her grandmother’s arms, with a feeling of utter love and security. And I think that music is even more powerful in this regard than smells. Whenever I hear the strains of Steely Dan’s song “*Rikki Don’t Lose That Number*” I am immediately back in the summer of 1974, driving down Westheimer St. in Houston, Texas, a cloak of oil-aroma-and-humidity wrapped around me as I go from my little garage apartment to the church where I was a summer ministerial intern.

But to be embodied also means that to live is to change. Barbara and I have both remarked that while we certainly wouldn't want to be 25 years old again, we would love, even if for a day, to have 25 year old bodies! But that is not possible. To live is to change. To love is to change and be changed. And that is also true of the music by which we glorify God, music which is such a wondrous expression of our embodiment. A decade or so ago, I was attending worship one morning at the church where Barbara was the pastor; our youngest daughter was sitting next to me. The service opened with one of my favorite great old hymns of the church, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." I was singing it from memory, enjoying listening to our daughter's beautiful voice helping strengthen my enthusiastic but sometimes rickety one. But suddenly the words we were singing diverged; in that church's hymnal some of the lyrics had been slightly changed. I found myself sputtering a bit and thinking "*That's wrong! They changed MY hymn!*" even though our daughter, of course, had no notion that these were the "wrong" lyrics! In fact, I then realized that just as the "old" hymn lived deep inside me, that "new" hymn would now be the one that lives deep inside her; she would be able to sing those words 10, 20, 50 years later and they would evoke for her a connection to God. Now, make no mistake: neither set of words was right or wrong, both sets of lyrics were beautifully rendered, but I had to confess when I got over my grump that the new words were just a wee bit better, a wee bit more singable, a wee bit more poetic, and so helped glorify God that much better. Nor was there something "wrong" in changing those lyrics. This is a process that has gone on since the first humans sang the first songs. The hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" has undergone at least 80 changes to its lyrics over the centuries since Martin Luther penned it. The hymns and songs of

the church are not items in a museum, but are living elements of a tradition; hymns and songs are not to be encased in acrylic, but are part of that wonderful always-changing complex meaning of what it means to be an embodied human for whom to live is to change.

The editors of the Chalice Hymnal understood that God is glorified in all kinds of ways. And so they made the decision that there would be, as befits the Disciples, a huge range of expressions. They did not, as some believe, decide for example, that all male references to God would be removed. There *are* some recent hymnals that have done that, but the Chalice Hymnal did not. And the editors thereby honored the fact that we can only approach God in images and analogies, and that for some folks the most deeply evocative image and analogy of the love of God is that beautiful image of “Father.” At the same time, the editors also knew that to live is to change and so there are hymns in which there is feminine imagery for God, because those images and analogies are indeed what speaks deeply to some other folks. Now, if “Father” is your most cherished image for God, you will never be told by me or by the Chalice Hymnal that you have to change that or that that’s “wrong.” But, on the other hand, you **will** be exposed to other images and analogies for describing God, ones that, for some folks, also deeply evoke the love of God. And my hope is that even if such hymns, such images, are never your first way of connecting to God, that you will nonetheless give thanks that others have indeed find God in their ways. And I’ll tell you a secret: there are hymns in the Chalice Hymnal that I would never have chosen. But that’s when I need to remind myself that worship is not about me but is about offering glory to God and that my preferred pathways are not the pathways that others may travel on. That’s

not something to be lamented, but to be learned from!

III. Who God Wants Us to Be

Hymns: Be Thou My Vision; I Was There to Hear Your Borne Cry

So, life changes. The world around us changes. Our bodies, housing our wonderful ability to make music with voice and breath and fingers, change – sometimes in wondrous ways and sometimes in frustrating ones. But in the midst of the certainty that to live is to change there is also another certainty, actually two certainties: God does not change and what God wants us to be also does not change. In every time, God is and will be the One who is, as the hymn says, “pure unbounded love,” the One who holds out the best possibility in each moment, the One who loves every creature He has made and also demands justice for each of those creatures. And in response to that very good news, the other thing that doesn’t change is this: What God wants us to be and do.

Disciples have never been too keen on creeds. Yet I have always thought that the Westminster Catechism had it just right when it says that the chief purpose of humankind is “to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.” It is the same purpose that the psalmist wrote of in Psalm 103 when he said that everything in his “inmost being” would “praise the Lord” (NIV translation, verse 1). What God wants us of us, then, is to “glorify Him” and thereby “praise the Lord.” And yet, let’s be honest: on some days that is easy: when life is good, praise bubbles easily to our lips, the way forward seems clear. But there are other sorts of seasons in life too: when life is one frustration after another, when depression curls its fingers around us, when a hard, hard thing blocks

our path. On days good or bad, what does it mean, then, to “glorify God” and “praise the Lord”? Well, I believe that I can sum that up in a sentence: what God wants us to do and be, how God wants us to glorify, is to decide, day in and day out, when life is easy and when life is hard, that we will choose by our words and our actions to *bless the future*. **To bless the future.** Let me illustrate with a story what that can mean.

The church Barbara served in California had an 8:30 a.m. “contemporary” worship service – that is, if what was meant by “contemporary” you meant “contemporary” with the 1970s. The music in that service was the music from when baby boomers were in high school and college. And the 11:00 a.m. “traditional” service always seemed to teeter on the edge of boredom, musically speaking, and more and more folks were saying “We need to do something.” And so they did. The church’s incredibly talented music director and several members formed a praise band. They practiced diligently for weeks, and their guitars and keyboard and drum set would really rock with songs of praise to God during those rehearsals. And as Barbara was talking with the church board about introducing this new praise band into worship one long-time member, a wonderful gentlemen, one of the saints of the church said: *“There will be a drum set on the chancel of my church in my worship service over my dead body.”* Several months went by; the praise band did indeed begin to play in worship on some Sundays. And one Sunday morning, both that gentleman and I happened to be late for worship. He was walking toward the sanctuary from one direction, and I was walking toward it from another. The praise band had already begun to play and the sound coming from the sanctuary was lively. And as he approached I could hear him singing along with what the band was playing and he was smiling. Over his dead body? No,

for he had apparently made a different decision. He had decided that instead he would value the future of the church, even if it was a future that he himself would not see, more than he valued things being just to his taste. He had decided praising God comes in a variety of sounds and that some of those sounds will connect new people with God in new ways. He had decided that he would indeed bless the future, a future where God always is, a future where God's vision for life abundant and eternal is always seeking new forms to express itself, a future where God's continued presence would be, as the hymn says, our "best thought, by day or by night; Waking or sleeping, Thy presence our light." May that indeed vision be our vision too! Won't you sing it with me, number 595, verses 1 and 2.