

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 10, 2015

"WHY DO WE SING?"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Psalm 98 ~ Acts 10:44-48 ~ John 15:9-17

I love our reading from the psalms today ... especially verses 4-6.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.

Oh how I wish I could sing! If I could choose just one of the many gifts that God neglected to bestow upon me it would be the ability to sing really, really well ... to sing like so many of you! But even though I can't carry a tune in a basket, I still sing because I just can't help it ... I sing in the shower, I sing in the car, I sing to my cats, and I sing in church. I think we are all hardwired for music, despite our abilities. As Plato expressed five centuries before Christ: "*Music gives soul to the universe, Wings to the mind, Flight to the imagination, A charm to sadness, Happiness and life to everything. It is the essence of order and lends to all that is good And just and beautiful.*"

All people are singing people. But especially we Christians are a singing people. Did you know that the earliest strata of the New Testament text ... the earliest information we have about what the first Christians believed ... comes from the author's quotations of liturgies and hymns of the early church. Paul, who is the earliest writer of New Testament, quotes from the hymns he sang with the people in worship. Orthodoxy springs from doxology ... scripture from worship. The same is true to our day. From hypnotic praise choruses accompanied by guitars and drums to the rich, deep chords of classical hymns on the pipe organ, Christians lift their voices to God. All music adds to worship, but congregational singing is the one place where we all participate. Worship is not a spectator sport, not a single part of it, and listening engages mind, heart, and soul ... but nothing does this quite so well as when we sing together. Our many voices become one. And while we are singing, our sins are forgotten, our shames are released, our bitterness is healed, and all our grudges set aside ... at least for as long as we are making a joyful noise to the Lord.

Today, to celebrate this gift ... this means of worship with which God has blessed us, I encourage you ... more than usual ... more than ever ... to join in these songs of worship. And as we sing today, I ask you to reflect on this ... why do we sing?

Why do we sing? "***Because We Are Included***"

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days. (Acts 10:44-48)

"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Where have we heard that question recently? Of course, just last week, in Acts 7, the Ethiopian Eunuch asked Philip, *"What is to prevent me from being baptized?"* And again, the question isn't being asked of the people needing to be included. It's being asked of the church, which doesn't really want to let "those kind of people" into the household of faith.

Being included has become a matter of prophetic activism in the church. God already includes every one of us, but we have had to fight and claw to get the rest of the church to accept that for some of our people. But inclusion shouldn't have to be a battle cry. It is good news for all of us, and I think our primary response to the simple good news that God includes us, too, should be celebration, dancing, and singing. We sing because we have been included in the love of God ... invited to the table of grace ... embraced by the beloved community. We are not alone. We are not left out. We lift our voices because, thank God, our voice is welcome and heard in the church, at least here and there. Our voice is heard by God ... always and everywhere ... and that is why we sing. Alleluia!

Why do we sing? ***"Because We Are Called"***

After claiming us as friends, Jesus gives us our marching orders:

I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15:16,17)

Fred Craddock told the story of a little boy carried on his Grandpa's shoulders into a country hardware store. The man behind the counter said, "My, haven't you grown tall!" The little boy smiled sheepishly and confided, "Well, it isn't all me." And here we are today standing on the shoulders of others who have laid down their lives for us. Let us remember them ... those whose love and labor and living sacrifice have enabled our prosperity, our opportunity, and our freedom to serve God. Everybody here owes somebody a great deal which you can never repay, except to those who follow after. No matter how tall you stand ... no matter how high you rise ... no matter how much you accomplish ... you have to look around and confess, "It isn't all me."

We are all beneficiaries. And what do we do with what we have received? Grace does not mean anything goes ... do whatever you want. That would not be a loving God, but an apathetic God, or more truly, a pathetic one. You cannot be a disciple of Jesus Christ without talking about ethics, morality, spiritual discipline, spiritual formation. We don't do anything to earn God's love. But we should respond to God's love with gratitude, humility, and most of all, service. In our gospel today, Jesus talks about obedience, but he gives us only one command, which

includes all commands really: *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*

Love means getting involved, being connected, caring and all that caring costs us. And it is by caring that we are saved, for one might argue whether anything about us is worth saving ... unless being saved makes us caring people. Let me put it this way. We need each other to be whole because we are not whole all by ourselves. When we care for someone else, it helps them, but it also helps us. When we serve someone else, it helps them, but it also helps us. When we love someone in Jesus' name, it helps them, but we are transformed. When we care, when we serve, when we love, our souls grow just as much as when we receive care or service or love - actually more. Therefore, Christ's invitation including us in his love and his calling that we be servants in the world sharing his love are two sides of a single reality. And what greater privilege could we have than to be called his servants, to be called his *friends*?

Jesus ordains every person who follows him - male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, of every race, of any orientation, whatever your career, whatever your particular mix of education and resources and talents and experiences. Jesus calls all of us to serve others in his name. It is our duty. It is our honor. It is our means to spiritual wholeness.

The Psalmist commands, *"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the Lord.* (Psalm 98:4-5)

But that's like commanding someone to smile. It doesn't really happen unless it comes from within. So why do we sing? We sing because we have been included in God's grace. We sing because we have been called to bear witness. We sing because of what we have experienced ... because it fills us with joy. Our songs express our gratitude, our happiness, our wonder before God. But they also express our sorrow, our grief, our outrage, our suffering. Yes, as much as we sing in testimony to our experience, we also sing to express our faith, our hope, our trust because the reality we see is not yet the reality God has promised.

The ninety eighth psalm is clearly a battle hymn celebrating victory over Israel's enemies. Only, this is not just the kind of hymn they would use *after* a battle ... it is the kind of hymn they would sing *before* the battle ... as an expression of trust in God anticipating a victory to come. Thus, we sing, not just with joy and thanks in remembering, but with courage and faith in hoping. We sing when we are struggling to believe that we might renew our trust. Over against appearances, we assert a reality to come, a victory which belongs to God and because it belongs to God, the victory belongs also already to us. We sing as a protest, as a sub-verse to the verse the dominating powers want to make us sing. We sing as a witness to the presence of God.

On December 11th 1981, in the village of El Mozote, El Salvador, units of the U.S. trained Atlacatl Battalion deliberately and systematically killed more than 200 men, women, and children, the entire civilian population of the village, as a warning to communist insurgents. A number of the people were gathered in the church as the massacre began. Knowing what was happening outside and what was about to happen to them, the people did an amazing thing ... they began to sing hymns. How could they sing? Because they knew that justice is in the hands of God ... and that nothing can ever separate us from the God who loves us. The soldiers could

take their lives, but not their souls, they could take their present happiness, but not their eternal joy.

That's a dramatic example, but music is an act of faith ... sometimes even an act of defiance. It is a means for joining in the celebration, even when you don't feel like it. It is a means for professing your faith, even when you find it hard to believe. It is a means of remembering and responding, of hoping and stepping forward in trust. It is reveille and it is taps and it is reveille again. Why do we sing? Because God has given us the words and the music to a song that never ends. Then let us join our voices and with "eternal alleluia's to Jesus Christ the King" ... sing on. May we pray?

O God, thank you for giving us a way to praise you that transforms us and joins us to one another and expresses our thoughts and feelings and encourages our hope and belief. "Tune our hearts to sing your grace," and make our praise acceptable in your sight. Amen.