ATHEISTS DON’T HAVE NO SONGS!

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 150
Mark 14:26
“When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” (Mk 14:26)

In our worship service this morning we are taking a few moments to recognize and to thank David, Michael, and our choir for the contribution they make week after week to our Sunday worship. We are truly blessed to have the music director, the organist, and the choir that we have. We are the envy of churches many times our size.

What we have is special not only because of the considerable talent that these individuals have and share; it is because of who they are as people and as Christians. This is not just a group of people who perform on a Sunday morning. They are Christians whose sharing is an integral part of their faith. As members of this church, their sharing is an integral part of their commitment to and their participation in this little community. I have the feeling that for them, as well as for us, there is a sacred dimension to what they share with us each Sunday.

Michael said it so eloquently a few weeks ago when he and Darlene shared some of the songs they have written. I was not able to hear it in person because I was at a conference in Denver, but thanks to David Crane I have heard a recording of the service.

In case you weren’t here, let me summarize what Michael said. He said that not too long ago he was going through a difficult period in his life. What he experienced is what has traditionally been called a wilderness experience. I’m sure we have all had that experience. We believe that God exists, but we can’t seem to find him. We know that God is with us, but we can’t feel his presence. We seek to reconnect with the living springs that are within us, but our daily life is a desert. We find it difficult to pray.

When we are undergoing a wilderness experience, even the words of scripture may hold little meaning for us. The truth of them seems distant from us or does not touch us in the way we need to be touched. Michael discovered that when he took the words of scripture and set them to music, they came alive. They became more than mere words; they became a prayer. Through this he rediscovered how to pray.

The songs that Darlene and Michael wrote arose out of the life struggles of this congregation. They are songs of hope and courage, songs of care and compassion. As
sacred music, they touch our soul, the very deepest part of us, that part of us that connects us with God. Sacred music serves to reconnect us with the very core of our being. It touches us more powerfully than the words alone can do.

Michael was of course stating the obvious. Religious music is a type of prayer—prayer set to music. Music was an integral part of the worship of ancient Israel and early Christian worship as well. In a letter written to the Roman Emperor Trajan by Pliny the Younger around 110 C.E., Pliny described what he had learned about the Christians and their worship. “They are accustomed to meet,” he said, “on a fixed day before daylight to sing a hymn of praise to Christ as God.”

It is not surprising that the two great celebrations of the Christian year, Christmas and Easter, are celebrated as much with music as with words of scripture. Think how bleak our celebration of Christmas would be without “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Silent Night,” and “Joy to the World!” Think of how much our Easter celebration is enriched by singing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today!” or by listening to Handel’s Messiah. These offerings of sacred music awaken our souls to God and help us to feel, to experience the living truth of the Incarnation and the Resurrection.

I am well aware that I have a more than marginal propensity to get carried away with trying to understand God and our Christian faith. I can’t help it; I am a thinking type. I want to help us understand God and God’s will for our lives. However, I also know how important feelings are to our relationship with God and to our worship.

I am well aware that there are limitations to our ability to understand God. In the final analysis, our love for God is far more important than our understanding of God, and our relationship with God is far more important than holding an orthodox belief system. The feelings that are invoked or evoked by our hymns, anthems, and other sacred music feed, nourish, and also guide this dimension of our spiritual life.

This is why music is such a special part of our worship. In our Sunday worship we read from the Bible and reflect on its meaning for our lives. We pray for ourselves and for those in special need. We also sing hymns, listen to anthems, and open ourselves to feel, to experience, to enter into the realm of the sacred in a way that only music can transport us.
We need to remember that religion is ultimately the recognition and the celebration of a Mystery. Throughout the centuries, sacred music has been one of the ways in which we are confronted by this Mystery. As Thomas Carlyle once remarked, “Music is a kind of inarticulate, unfathomable speech which leads one to the edge of the infinite and compels one to gaze in.” In my own experience, sacred instrumental and choral music brings me to this experience. It is an important part of my worship.

Let me say a word about the singing of hymns. Hymns are not a performance put on by the choir for our benefit. Hymns should be sung with spirit. John Wesley, the Methodist reformer, told his congregation, “Beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep. Lift up your voices with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, or more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.”

I’m not exactly sure what the “songs of Satan” are. People might disagree as to whether Pink Floyd and the Grateful Dead fall into this category, or whether it would be Donny Osmond and Barry Manilow. Along with the latter, I would cast my vote for elevator music and, around Christmas, the chipmunks’ versions of Christmas carols and the barking dogs’ rendition of “Jingle Bells.” But whatever musical offerings you might identify as the songs of Satan, I’m sure you get the idea of what Wesley was saying.

Singing is peculiar to revealed religion. You find it but rarely in other religions, e.g., Confucianism. You find it but rarely in lodges, clubs, or associations. Singing was so much a part of the Hebrew faith that their hymnal, the Book of Psalms, was placed right smack in the middle of the Bible. Singing is so important to Christian faith and worship that more than 500,000 Christian hymns have been written.

Our hymns, which are basically spiritual poems, are an important part of our faith and the articulation of our faith. As you know, I love our hymnal, which was compiled by the Reformed Church in America. These hymns are a powerful articulation of the struggles and the faith of the person who wrote the hymn, and they can speak to us just as powerfully today. I am concerned that without an exposure to these old-time hymns, these articulations of worship, praise, repentance, and faith, our children will grow up having absolutely no feeling for a dimension of worship that is so important to us.

The meaningfulness of these religious experiences set to music has produced hymns that cross all denominational lines. In this sense, they speak to something that is
universal. Herber, the Anglican, wrote “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” Toplady, the Calvinist, wrote “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.” Miss Adams, the Unitarian, wrote “Nearer My God to Thee.”

We as a community church should appreciate the many denominational streams that have flowed not only into our theology but also into our sacred music. Whittier, the Quaker, wrote “Eternal Goodness.” Faber, the Roman Catholic, wrote “There’s a Wildness in God’s Mercy.” Doddridge, the Congregationalist, wrote “O Happy Day.” John Fawcett, the Baptist, wrote “Blest Be the Tie that Binds.”

Finally, on the lighter side, I just have to play a little piece of music for you. It is a cut from a bluegrass album recorded by the actor/comedian Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers, his backup band. Darlene, Corey, and I heard them perform this last summer at Symphony Hall in Boston. Steve Martin, by the way, is a world-class banjo player. This particular piece, however, does not showcase Steve Martin’s banjo talents. It is sung a cappella, as many of the bluegrass gospel songs are sung.

Robert Burns is quoted as having said that there is one problem that comes with being an atheist: atheism doesn’t have any good hymns. I don’t know if Steve Martin got the idea from Robert Burns or if he thought it up on his own, but the piece is entitled “Atheists Don’t Have No Songs!” (For those of you who are reading a written copy of this sermon, I encourage you to listen to the audio version of it on our web site.)

(We will listen to “Atheists Don’t Have No Songs!”)

Since we are not atheists, we have some really good songs! In fact, we meet this morning to sing hymns of praise to God. We thank God for the offerings of our organist, music director and choir, and we also affirm the importance of bringing our own gifts before God, offering our own gifts to the life of this church as David, Michael, and the members of our choir do every Sunday.

God grant that we will be sensitive to the Holy Spirit who guides and inspires not only the offerings of our choir but also our own voices, our own thoughts, our own feelings as we open our hearts, our minds, and our hands in the worship of our Lord.

A reflection shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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