

## HOW CAN I KEEP FROM SINGING?

Text on Sunday, June 20, 2010

*Colossians 3: 12-17*

“My life flows on in endless song above earth’s lamentation. I hear the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation. Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing: It finds an echo in my soul—How can I keep from singing?”

Some days, do you not marvel that it is possible to sing, to be happy, even joyful “above earth’s lamentation”? Especially on those days when the world comes lovely to your eyes and skin but your attention is opened wide to others’ sorrows—for Uzbeks today, for Gulf Coast townspeople, for birds and turtles and fish doomed by our demand for that substance our Mother anciently buried deep beyond reach; those days when you are opened to others’ experience of poverty and hunger unyielding, of violence which shatters the trunks of human lives, of neglect and addiction, and disability. One could go on. What is this mystery of joy and peace—not always there, goodness knows—yet a fundament somehow deeper than shadows and evil?

Some would fundamentally disagree. The phrase “Get real” usually means *Stop looking at the up side and think about the harsh and intolerable “reality.”* We often talk as if happiness is bought with ignorance and denial, failing which we would plunge into remorse and griefs. Some might argue that evolution has merely trained us (mostly) away from confronting “reality,” which would otherwise paralyze our function. But the assertion that evil is more real than good founders in the sea of what I’d call *eu-function*.

Consider. No one punctured the tires of my car yesterday, nor the day before—and I think no one on the street had that complaint. All the glass in the windows of this house remained intact all day. Everybody stopped at the stop light at the corner; it never malfunctioned. All day long electricity flowed through the veins of our homes. I don’t know how it works, but it worked. Not one course of brick in any wall on Henry Street gave up yesterday. They were such bricks! The asphalt in the roads continued to hang together to bear millions of wheels. The plumbing worked—in our homes, in our bodies. Couples made love and that worked again, more or less. Children by the tens of thousands listened to their parents. By the thousands, teenagers didn’t, yet in ways carefully arranged not to kill the body of honor which shows up in families daily as touches and conversations and meals made and meals eaten. Sleep came to almost everyone. Eyes opened after an interval. Millions saw again.

Now, as we have said, some things and some people and some systems did break down, with hellish consequences. But notice that when something breaks, it is not hard to say what happened, as when a link in a chain breaks: the problem is . . . there! But when something works, it is not possible to say just what is working, because anything that is functioning is composed of a literally infinite chain of good links, from the big, visible things we’ve just described right down to powerfully bonding molecules and atoms and God knows what—quarks and muons. Who has leisure to inventory the infinite abundance of things that work?

Because goodness and function arise with inconceivable abundance, the Church has always drawn forth praise and thanksgiving from the tongues of its people. It is for this reason that the service of the people opens with praise to God and closes with benediction (*bene*=Latin for *good*) no matter what grave matters God’s word may have touched in us between. To desire from your heart to praise God for all things, you needn’t believe in a theory that God disturbs the order of things to make good things happen. Neither does seeing the mercy of God in all things require you to doubt the wisdom of science to show how things work. Praise, peace, and joy are first and last a movement of the heart in right relation to creation; a humble will to see what is, and to serve, more than to be served.

To this end, we are drawn into the tradition of a singing church. We learned this pattern from our Jewish forebears. The Psalms were songs. Their melodies are lost, but here and there in the Psalms, one finds instructions for musicians. It is no surprise that when Jesus was with his disciples on that last night after their last supper was over, though surely they were sad, they sang a hymn, the stories say, and went out to the Mount of Olives. In the first century, the writer of *Colossians* encouraged the fledgling church, “with gratitude in your hearts, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God”—to which same counsel *Ephesians* adds, “making melody to the Lord in your hearts.” Why song? Why sing?

Here is Martin Luther on the question:

“If you say ‘Hey Birdie, why are you so gay? You have no cook and no cellar,’ he will answer, ‘I do not sow, I do not reap, and I do not gather into barns. But I have a cook, whose name is Heavenly Father. Fool! Shame on you that you do not sing. You work all day and cannot sleep for worry. I sing as if I had a thousand throats.’ What then shall we say of the human voice, to which nought else may be compared? . . . Music is to be praised as second only to the Word of God, because by her are all the emotions swayed. Nothing on earth is more mighty to make the sad gay and the gay sad, to hearten the downcast, mellow the overweening, temper the exuberant, or mollify the vengeful . . . This precious gift has been bestowed on humans alone to remind them that they are to praise and magnify the Lord. When natural music is sharpened and polished by art, one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in his wonderful work of music . . . Whoever does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod . . .”

Now, here at First Church, we are abundantly blessed with “natural music sharpened and polished” by artists, and we have long since seen and heard with amazement the great wisdom of God in the work of music. On this particular day, when our beloved choir is at rest, let us hold our attention for a while on the wonder of music and praise sent from our own throats and lips, for singing has long been one of the chief spiritual practices of Christians. Why *sing*?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, also a Lutheran, wrote a little volume about what is essential for our life together, in a book of just that name:

“Why do Christians sing when they are together? Because in singing together, it is possible for them to speak and pray the same Word at the same time; in other words, because here they can unite in the Word. All devotion, all attention should be concentrated upon the Word in the hymn. The fact that we do not speak it but sing it only expresses the fact that spoken words are not adequate to express what we want to say, that the burden of our song goes far beyond all human words. Yet we do not hum a melody; we sing words of praise to God, words of thanksgiving, confession, and prayer. Thus the music is completely the servant of the Word.” (*Life Together*, p. 59)

Now, many people feel that it is just not cool to sing. Perhaps they think ill of the sound of their own voice. Perhaps singing draws out more emotion than one cares to express publicly. Perhaps another would no more want be heard singing in public than seen dancing. Perhaps it seems to still others like a behavior of herd-mentality, where individuality is suppressed as voices join in feelings and thoughts that cannot be individually probed and tried. Perhaps to sing seems to some too much like that believing, trusting innocence left behind in childhood, but no part of you now.

All of that is understandable. But all of it misses the wisdom of the spiritual practice of singing. One way and another, the aim of the church is to lead you and me to give up something from ourself—I mean, to abandon it, to stop worrying about it, to let go, and to step freely and trustingly into the river of reality and abundance and to give thanks. To sing is that. To not hold back anymore. To not worry that you are part of something great, which you do not control, something incalculable and immense, yet trustworthy. To let your heart open with your mind. To feel vibrations in all your body. To surrender to this mystery of being a creature who beholds—who feels— her Creator, his Father. The simple fact is that if with your whole life, you win the battle to preserve yourself separate and intact, then you lose. Singing in the congregation is one of the gentle, persistent ways the church has taught its servants how to *not* save yourself apart, but to take part, and give up, that you may receive from God’s

hand life no one can create.

We have seen sometimes how powerful, even to move mountains, are the joined voices of the faithful in a movement for justice and peace, especially the civil rights movement of the last century. Sometimes I think that no movement, whether from right or left, will ever really move anything unless the movers have song in their heart joined to a thousand voices. Fortunately, song does not readily mix with fear and hatred, but sooner with yearning and lament, with hope and love. Therefore, sing, O church. Be your hearts and minds aflame with compassion for the wretched or with righteous anger at the injustices of privilege and power; be your own life heavily burdened with cares you know not how to bear—sing with assurance that peace and joy are your spiritual birthright. Sing with hope that we who through sorrow and joy still raise our voice in song are once more being made into a movement to turn the earth from shadows into light.

All this summer long, I encourage you more and more freely to sing. Come with offerings of songs you know, or want to know. Each Sunday, you choose the last song we sing—and if one of you wishes to teach us a new song, may the Spirit of God show you when and how. Let us by all means learn more of musics from around the world. And whatever we do, in word or deed, let us do all in the name of the Lord, giving thank to God, this Father's Day, through him.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

*First Presbyterian Church  
Brooklyn, New York*

© 2010 Stephen H. Phelps