

“CELEBRATING THE ARTS”

Aug. 26, 2018

Psalm 150

Isn't Psalm 150 such a great psalm? It is actually the last psalm in the book, and probably put there for a reason. The psalms were like the hymnbook for the nation of Israel, all of them set to music and sung at one point or another, and this one was chosen to be the last one, the climatic finale, if you will. Let's read the Call to Worship again, and say it as if we mean it, with brightness and joy in our voices, with a note of praise within us. Here we go!

Now doesn't this psalm make you just want to get up and dance or sing or play an instrument for our Lord? That is what it was supposed to do! Today is the final Sunday with us for Clayton Heidebreder, our minister of music for the past three years. Clayton has changed us as a community through his wonderful gifts of using the arts to praise God, and I think we have changed Clayton a little bit too! You know, sometimes we take the arts like music for granted, and don't remember how important they are for communicating God's truths in such special ways!

Now Christianity and the arts have had a long relationship. From about 1000 AD to perhaps 1800 or so, most artists of different types in Europe saw their art as a way of glorifying God, and the Church in turn saw the arts as integral to its mission and purpose. Music, painting, drama, dance, were all done in most cases during these centuries to share Christian truth and praise God. As an example, as some of you know I and my family went to Florence, Italy this past March. And as we walked into various churches, we were so impressed and moved by the art work and the sculpture, many of which dated back hundreds of years. The most impressive piece of art work we saw was Michelangelo's David, a sculpture done when he was just 26. It presents David as such a beautiful human being, and I at least look at that sculpture and see God's wonderful creativity in it. The whole trip reminded me of how the church then saw the arts. You see, back then the Church invited the arts and artists into the life of the church because they recognized the power of art to communicate the truths of the Christian faith. Can you imagine walking into our church this morning and finding really well done paintings and sculptures and other arts forms by local artists all over the building? Wouldn't that be great? That's the way it actually was when Rev. Elaine and I went out to Boulder, Colorado to visit the church of our former seminarian, Pedro Silva. They had beautiful art works from local artists all over the building, and it was such a wonderful gift to see as you walked around.

Of course, many of the great musicians of those earlier centuries also wrote music to give God the glory. Bach, Vivaldi, Handel and so many others wrote music that would glorify God and communicate the truths of the Christian faith. We are reminded of that every Easter when we as a church sing Handel's Hallelujah Chorus together! Music has such a wonderful way of lifting our spirits and connecting to our emotions, to our heart, and is always a gift from God.

But then during the age of Enlightenment, in the late 1700's and beyond, artists of different types started moving away from doing Christian themes in their work, and focusing on all kinds of other subjects. And when that happened, sadly the Church began turning her back on artists. With the exception of music, other art forms began to disappear from the church and were absent from it for a long period of time. But that has all begun to change in the past few decades again. Music in the

Church has gone through so many exciting and creative changes recently. We of course have seen that in our own church, as we have been willing to try some new forms of music while at the same time honoring older forms as well. Multi-media tools such as movies and slideshows are being used by churches in new and creative ways. Drama has been taken back as a Christian art form as churches around the country have drama ministries. Churches are now having resident artists who do paintings and make up banners that decorate a church, just like the churches I told you about in Florence Italy from centuries ago. Once Irene and I went to a church where a woman was drawing on an easel at the front of the church at the beginning of the service. She continued to do that throughout worship, as music was being played, and as the sermon was being preached, and what she was drawing obviously tied in with the theme of the whole morning as we saw at the end of the service. And we're not talking stick figures here either, like it would have been if I was drawing up there! This woman was really talented. There are so many other creative ways that churches are using the arts in their ministries now that we could spend a whole sermon just on this topic.

But I want to stress this morning that the purpose of the arts in worship is for praising God and for sharing with others the truths of the faith, not for drawing attention to the artist. The Sound of Music is one of America's historic best loved plays and movies, and the writer of the music for that play was the legendary Richard Rogers. He wrote once that "one musical problem that confronted me when I wrote the Sound of Music was the opening piece in which nuns are heard chanting a Catholic prayer. I had to make sure that what I wrote would be found authentic. So through friends, I got in touch with Mother Morgan, head of the music department at Manhattanville College in Purchase, NY. She invited me to an especially arranged concert at which the nuns and seminarians sang and performed many different types of religious music. An unexpected moment came when Mother Morgan, waving her arms like a coach at a football game, was vigorously conducting a particularly dramatic passage. As the music built to its peak, Mother Morgan's booming command could be clearly heard: "Pray it." That is really what the arts are to be in the life of the church: another form of prayer, another way of praising God and relating to God and communicating with God.

This is what is emphasized in our psalm today. It tells us the answers to the where, why, and how questions of praying to and glorifying God. As for where, we are told to praise God in God's sanctuary, and also in the mighty firmament, which means everywhere in the world and in heaven too. In other words, our God is to be lifted up in praise both in church when we gather on a Sunday morning, and also in the world during the week wherever you happen to be. And why do we praise God? Well, we praise God for God's mighty deeds and exceeding greatness! The psalmist then describes the how of praise, saying we can do it with trumpets and lutes, with harps and timbrel, castanets and dance, banjo and flute, cymbals and a big bass drum, fiddles and mandolin. All the arts can be ways we praise and honor God. And finally, who is to praise God? Well, the Psalmist says "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" You know, not all of us are gifted in the area of the arts. And even those of us who are gifted in one area of the arts may not be necessarily gifted in others. But I do think that all of us respond to the arts, all of us are touched in different ways by the arts. And so all of us, no matter who we are, can through the arts praise the Lord!

And that is what Clayton as our music minister has helped us to do over the last three years that he has served with us. We hired Clayton for his musical gifts, but he brought others to us as well. Some of you might remember the liturgical dance that he and Sarah Cavanaugh did on a Christmas Eve, right Clayton a couple of years back! We still have the video of that! Clayton has done various dramatic skits

over the years, most famously with our children's and youth ministry director Wendy, and his capacity for improve is legendary! We have seen that gift of being on stage as well in a couple of children's times Clayton did recently.

And then of course there is Clayton's music. He did a wonderful job with our choir, and actually added new members to it, which is something you rarely see in many churches at this point. He of course on his first Sunday made a point of going through coffee hour and asking every single person there whether they would join the choir, a feat that I was always personally in awe of! When our choir sang, they did so in a way that praised God, and moved all of us with their beauty, like a prayer.

In addition, Clayton was very supportive of our Bell Choir and our Joyspring more contemporary group. Some music ministers I have worked with have been threatened by others doing different forms of music. But Clayton was supportive of both groups, participating in both at various points. In general, he always sought as our music minister to have the arts in our worship be a form of prayer. So let me ask you-what are some things that you have come to appreciate about Clayton's ministry over time?

Praise be to the living God, Amen.