

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God who hears us, who knows us, who seeks us out, we give you great thanks today as we come to your house. We are broken human beings that often fall short of our expectations and the expectations you set for faithfulness, but we claim your grace and enter the house of worship to praise you for your fidelity to us. We come to worship, we come to be community, we come here to sing of the timeless joyfulness of wholeness in you. Your goodness and the goodness of Christ Jesus lead us to name our holiness as people who are flawed and broken, but beautiful nonetheless. This gift is tremendous.

O God, we are blessed with the history of our hymns and spiritual songs that lift us up in the darkest times and magnify our joy in brightness. Help us to dig richly into these hymns to hear the messages they tell us, to hear anew our favorites, to learn something new and claim that abundance. Help us to serve in the same way we sing: with one focus, with one voice, with one song. Help us to keep ourselves communally together as we offer our individual songs. Some of us sing melody, some harmony, and some concentrate on the rhythm. You created us in our individual ways to merge with the rest, so that the song becomes vibrant and lively when we work together. Join us in hearts, minds, and song, to agree to disagree when we must but to hold our unity as sisters in brothers in Christ of the highest regard. Let the harmony of our togetherness mix with our combined melody of your service and praise as we seek to discern the proper rhythm of life in this world, all in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

## SERMON

Catherine and I were at a hockey game last weekend, and music hit us in a new way. We saw the local Colorado Eagles for the first time, right outside of Loveland. I dearly love

hockey, and Catherine went because she dearly loves me, thankfully. About five minutes before the game, they show a video montage that shows the home team making goals, hits, and saves to get the crowd all pumped up for the game. Along with this video came some very epic music. I had never seen the Colorado Eagles play, but watching this video got me all ready and excited for Eagles hockey. I leaned over to Catherine and told her how much these things get me revved up for hockey. She even said how the epic music gives her shivers...even for hockey. Music struck us in a way that sparked emotion, which brought us into a new reality. Work was all done for the day; now it was time to get on some quality hockey action...which meant, of course, several goals and a few fights.

Music has a way of getting to our deepest selves. A few notes can change our attitudes; a few notes can spark memories. Music changes us and become emotionally attached to us inseparably. I'm sure many of you have a song that connects you to a special part of your lives or a special time. I've taken this realization so much to heart that I've created lists of songs that have become a part of my life. I have a playlist for every part of my life: high school, college, grad school, my time at Faith. I hear songs that harken me back to a certain time and place, back to time among friends, back to certain emotions, like when I first met Catherine. I'm sure in the months to come I'll match music with our wedding and our first year of marriage. Music integrates itself into our souls. It is so powerful, so we naturally turn to the music's unspoken language to discover ourselves and to convey our deepest selves to God.

If we named all the ways we worship, I bet that singing would be the favorite. Indeed, we love to sing. It fills us with joy to burst out in vibrant song. When I got the question in the basket, "What is the most popular and beloved hymn?" I thought that we

should discuss the joy and blessing that hymns are. This is a church that is definitely rooted in music and proud of that heritage. There is a lot to be proud of; we ground ourselves in that ministry. We seek to utilize music to understand ourselves and to connect with God. Of the many languages we utilize to speak to God, among those being the language of liturgy, the language of action, and the language of prayer, the language of music is often the most beloved and widely known. Let's delve into the many dimensions of this way of connecting with God, which I believe branches many of these together.

Music has always been at the root of worship for all generations. Even the Bible has its own book of songs: the book of Psalms. Although the music didn't survive, the rhythm and message of these timeless songs last to this day. The Psalms, such as Psalm 147, urge us to "Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving," in many ways. If you look in either hymnal, you have songs that continue this tradition. Our second hymn, "Let There Be Peace on Earth," was a song requested by a member of the congregation, and I thought it was very fitting to place in our order of service today. Let's take a look back at it, on page 681. The first line indicates the hopeful outcome of our mission and takes ownership of that mission with "let it begin with me." This wording allows us to see that we have taken on this grand task, and the rest of the song shows why this mission is important. "With God as our Father, brothers all are we," names that because God has claimed all as God's blessed creatures, we walk together; we are in mission together, not in contention. We are called to be in peace, to walk with each other in perfect harmony. The song wraps up with a promise to make that happen: "take each moment and live each moment in perfect harmony." When we look at this deeply, we can see that there is a mission here, a task to undertake, and the calling of God outlined clearly.

What makes hymns so meaningful for me is how the writers not only attempt to give a message, they also seek to craft theology at the same time. "Let There Be Peace on Earth" did this really well, but there are numerous more examples. Many people appreciate contemporary Christian music, but I will always prefer the hymnal, for the music here is rich with meaning, discovery, emphasis and reemphasis. The hymns we sing seek to craft a vocabulary on how to speak about God, how God relates to us, how God works in the world, and how we are to respond as faithful seekers of God. One of the first hymns I remember singing is "God of the Sparrow, God of the Whale" on page 122 of the Red Hymnal, and I remember being intrigued by how this hymn names how our God created such a diverse creation. The poetry in which the hymnal speaks draws me deeper into the wonder of how God created all these wonderful things. Call me a bit biased, but I favor the traditional songs. They reach for a richer way of looking at God and how to be among the faithful.

Hymns, like any other language, have their appropriate ways of expression. There is a good way to sing, but we aren't talking about technicalities. If you would, open your red hymnals and turn to the page right before the table of contents, with a Roman Numeral seven. This lists John Wesley's original Directions for singing. Take a brief look-over. Some of these are a little outdated and pretty funny, but nevertheless, some instructions are often spot-on for all times and ages. Sing together. Sing in harmony. Sing modestly, but sing with good courage. Sing spiritually. Not only are these good advice for singing hymns, it's good advice for being in community. Be courageous without putting yourself above everyone else. Walk together; don't pace yourself out-front of everyone else. And, of course, do not bawl. Singing hymns is just like how we live life; together and in harmony for faithfulness. The focus ultimately is on God's worship instead of our own voices.

Hymns are integral because of the theology they craft, the messages they send, and the way we sing them. However, we can dishonor hymns. I'm sure you probably scratched your heads around the scripture readings today. Out of the three readings, two sounded praiseful. One of these things is not like the others, but there's good reason for this. We often need a faithful counterbalance. The Book of Colossians gives us basic instructions for how we act in the Christian life. We act fully of forgiveness and with great worship, uplifting our hearts in Christian love. Singing spiritual songs, psalms, and hymns comes with this. We praise God because we live with hearts full of gratitude. Psalm 27 is an ongoing praise of God that exemplifies trust and confidence in the ways of the Lord. These are both glowing examples of the service of music.

On the other hand, one reading sounded rather angry. When we worship, we worship in many ways, in the same diversity we are as the Body of Christ. We are blessed to have a great choir and musicians, who share their gifts of music with us. On the other hand, we have some who are not singers. These people claim that they can't sing a note on key, and that's just fine not to be a perfect singer. We share other gifts as well. We have a pastor who hopefully preaches a good sermon now and then. The unfortunate thing is when the worship stays in these walls and does not journey out into the world in other forms. In the book of Amos, that is where the worship stopped. The people Amos the prophet preached to did all the right things in their worship practice, but when worship ended, the faithfulness stopped. They treated people as less than human and took advantage of them when they would also seek to worship God. Amos, speaking on behalf of God, rebukes their acts of worship, saying "I think what this text tells us is that worship and the singing of hymns is one part of a greater lifestyle that lifts up God's goodness and love

in all facets. Music, when properly given and sung, should empower us to continue the work of ministry; it is not necessarily an end in itself. I think this is well seen when we look at the hymns we sung today and the hymns we sing every week. “Let there be Peace on Earth” leads us to be peaceful agents of a God who loves all. “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” remembers the sacrificial love of Jesus as a life-giving nature. This ongoing source of strength we remember leads us into sacrificial love for ourselves as well.

Hymns and music are an integral part to the worshipping life. Music naturally translates into an experience when the veil becomes thin, and we can sense a taste of the divine. Sometimes it gives us invigorated life in the short term, as it did with Catherine and I at the hockey game. Other times, it invigorates us deeply in our soul, as some songs and hymns stay with us eternally as a part of our soul. Music of all kinds, when lifted to God, becomes an act of worship. Indeed, good music comes from the grateful and praiseful heart. Music, though, is one part of worship: Amos redefines worship to include all things: music, liturgy, and action outside of the traditional worship space. The full, multi-dimensional life is the life of true worship in a world that often wants to call being present as enough. Amen and Amen.

But wait! I notice that, in the midst of a grand sermon about hymns and music in worship, I never really answered the original question. Now that the sermon is done, I can actually answer the question, at least, in my opinion. The most beloved hymn, in my opinion, can be found on page 107, *Amazing Grace*.