

Your Single Most Important Habit

Part 4 – Welcome to the Choir

Colossians 3:12-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 27, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17, NRSV)

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For most of us, the act of gathering for worship is so familiar that we don't think twice about what we're doing. I've often wondered, however, what this activity might look like to somebody who had never been exposed to what's happening here this morning. We recite pre-printed words together, some thousands of years old. We read from the same book at the same time. We share the strangest meal together, a piece of bread dipped in a cup. We extend peace to one another. We occasionally put water on one another. And we sing together, all together.

Why sing? That's one of the strangest things we do in worship. Who are we singing to? Where else in life do you gather with people to sing together? Happy Birthday. Maybe at a concert when everybody knows the words to a popular song. "Take me out to the ballgame" during the seventh inning stretch. Other than that, church is one of the few places you'll find people singing together. It really is unusual.

The thing is, God's people have always sung together when they have come together. In the scriptures you'll often find somebody breaking into song after some momentous event. Moses and the Israelites sing after God delivers them through the Red Sea.¹ Deborah leads the Israelites in song after God saves them from

the Canaanites.² Hannah sings when God blesses her with a child.³ And of course, Mary sings when she learns God has found favor with her and conceived in her womb a child who will be called the Son of the Most High.⁴

The entire Old Testament book of Psalms is nothing but songs, 150 of them, which Israel used as their hymnbook for worship. One of my favorite details in the Gospels is the note in Matthew 26:30 that after they shared the Lord's Supper, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn together before they went out to the Mount of Olives where Jesus knew he was to be arrested later that night. After the resurrection the church continued to sing. Pliny the Younger, a Roman magistrate in the 1st century, included this detail about those early Christians in a famous letter he wrote to Emperor Trajan, "They meet at dawn to sing a hymn to Christ as God."⁵ It was a radical thing to do in those days. Maybe it still is.

Music is such a large part of our worship here at Faith, as it is in most every church around the world today. Every time we gather in worship we sing. We devote a significant part of our budget to music. We support a Chancel Choir, a Worship Band, a brass band, our Youth Faith Singers. We've made significant investment in musical instruments. There is a hymnal for each of you to use this morning and a giant screen up front to display lyrics big enough for everybody to read. We sing at youth group. We sing at retreats. We sing all the time together. But why? Why such an investment in music and such a commitment to song? What, if anything, is it all accomplishing in the end?

Well, the first reason we sing in the church is because God tells us to sing. Did you know that? In fact, there are over 100 times in scripture where we are *commanded* to sing. The second most common command in the whole Bible is to sing in praise.⁶ Psalm 149:1 declares, "**Sing to the Lord a new song.**" Psalm 95:1 urges us, "**O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a**

² Judges 5:1-31

³ I Samuel 2:1-10

⁴ Luke 1:46-55

⁵ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (InterVarsity Press, 1979), 206.

⁶ "To Believe is to Sing: An Interview with Keith Getty", see <https://www.sweetwater.com/insync/believe-sing-interview-keith-getty/>

¹ Exodus 15:1-18

joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.” God commands us to sing.

With that in mind, let me be straight with you this morning, a little truth in love. There are more than a few of you here who regularly ignore this command. Right? On any given Sunday morning I can look out over the congregation in the middle of a song or hymn and see many of you just standing there with your mouths shut. The words are there in bold English right in front of you, perfectly legible. The melody is beautiful, the music is well led, the lyrics are poetic and full of passion and praise for our God who has given us literally every good thing we possess in life, life itself, and yet many of us stand there silent. Now if that’s you, maybe you’re reading the words and meditating on them as we go, or maybe you’re thinking through your shopping list for later that afternoon. I don’t know, but either way you’re not singing and that, again, is a bit of a problem because singing is a holy command, something all of us were created to do and now told by God to do.

The passage we just read from Colossians is a great example of one of those 100-plus commands in scripture for God’s people to sing. In context, Paul is writing to the church in Colossae in the 1st century and at this point in the letter he’s encouraging them to live lives that resemble the life of Christ. They are to be people of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and so on, people who are committed to forgiveness, clothed with love, and marked by peace. Paul here is simply echoing Jesus’ command to all disciples, that they are to learn to obey everything he commanded⁷, to learn to live life as he would live life if he were in their shoes. This Jesus-shaped life is the goal of every Christian.

But how does that happen? How do we grow to increasingly resemble and represent Jesus in our lives? Well, Paul gives us a specific answer to that question in the following verses when he writes, **“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”** For us to become more like Jesus the first thing that needs to happen is that our thinking needs to change. We need to see the truth clearly, the truth about God, about the world, about ourselves, about others, about salvation. The primary way that happens is through God’s Word, the scriptures, the teachings of Christ. As we immerse ourselves in scripture, letting it dwell in our minds and hearts richly, teaching and correcting and encouraging one another with God’s Word as we are doing here this morning, then God works to transform us from the inside out. Paul writes

in Romans 12:2, **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the *renewing of your minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God.”**⁸

To go further, it is fascinating to me that almost in the same breath Paul then commands the church to sing songs to God with gratitude in their hearts.⁹ It’s as if he understands that one of the ways that God’s Word gets worked into us so that it can transform us is when we sing God’s Word. There is mystery here, I will admit that. But still I believe that we are commanded to sing when we gather as a church because there is something powerfully transformative that happens when we do so, and something valuable we miss when we fail to do so.

This morning I’m going to give you seven reasons – biblical reasons, I believe – why we are commanded to sing. For many of you who already sing in worship I know I’m preaching to the choir (pun intended). For you, I hope these reasons will simply encourage and deepen this practice. For those of you who do not sing, my prayer is you will be motivated to begin to do so as you recognize the profound benefits that come when we obey God and sing to him a new song. At the end, all of us are going to have an immediate opportunity to put this into practice.

So, the first and most important reason we sing in worship is to bring glory to God. When it is rightly practiced, music in worship always makes God both the subject and the object. We sing about God to God. In a way, all church music is prayer, not performance. It’s widely known that on many of his compositions Johann Sebastian Bach would inscribe either *I.N.J.* (*In the Name of Jesus*), or *S.D.G.* (*Soli Deo Gloria – for the glory of God alone*). In his view, all music was composed and sung for the glory of God. Apparently music brings such glory to God that we will be singing to him on into eternity. In Revelation 7 we’re given a picture of heaven where people from every tribe and nation are gathered around the throne – even the angels are there! – and this song of praise is being offered to God: **“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”**¹⁰ We don’t yet know the tune that accompanies these lyrics, but I suspect it’s magnificent.

One of the most common reasons I hear people give for not singing in worship is that they don’t like the music. It’s too traditional. It’s too modern. It’s not my cup of tea. Let me ask you, who here from time to time finds

⁸ NRSV. Emphasis mine.

⁹ Paul says something very similar in Ephesians 5:19.

¹⁰ Revelation 7:12 (NRSV)

⁷ See Matthew 28:18-20

that you do not like a particular piece of music that we have used here in worship? All of us, right? We all have different musical tastes. Well, next time that happens here's what I want you to do. As the song that you don't much like is being sung – and hopefully you're singing along anyway – say a silent prayer of thanks. Specifically, thank God that this song you don't much like is serving to remind you that worship is not all about you. In a world where we are so used to customizing everything to our own tastes and preferences, playlists of only the songs we like, music in worship can snap us back to reality. One of the worst things that could happen to you along these lines, in fact, is for you to find yourself in a church where all the music all the time is always in line with your tastes. That would be terrible actually. If that were to happen you would be in danger of missing the whole point of worship. You have been given an extraordinary gift when some of the music we sing here at Faith is not music you necessarily like. That's good. It's not about you, or me. Music in worship is sung for the glory of God alone.

Second, music shapes our thinking which, in turn, shapes our lives. We work hard to choose music in worship that is both melodically beautiful and lyrically rich. Mark does a phenomenal job of this, as did Betsy before him. The hymns we sing have stood the test of time for good reason. Pay attention to the lyrics, they are loaded with profound theological truth and extraordinary good news. The modern praise choruses we choose are often simply scripture put to music. As we sing them we are literally memorizing scripture, or at least the truths of scripture. Think of how many lyrics to secular songs you know by heart. I can sing the lyrics to hundreds and hundreds of 80's songs I played over and over in high school and college. Imagine the formative impact that sacred music can have on us when it works its way into our memories. As Paul teaches us, it helps the Word of Christ to dwell in us richly.

This is partly why our singing should extend from Sunday morning into our homes. It's why my wife and I sung to our kids nearly every night when we put them to bed when they were younger. All four of my kids preferred to have Esther do the singing because her voice is far superior to mine. But when they drew the short straw and it was me there at bedtime, I would often sing them a simple version of the Aaron's blessing in Numbers 6: *"The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you. And give you peace, and give you peace, and give you peace forever."*¹¹ I guarantee you those words are deeply imbedded in the hearts and minds of all four of my kids where I have to believe they

have helped shape their thinking and, in turn, their lives. Take every chance you can get with your kids or grandkids to sing God's Word to them.

Third, when we sing together in worship we encourage one another. One of the greatest things you can bring to worship every Sunday is a readiness to encourage others in their worship. Pray for people as you see them come in and take their seats. Pray for those of us leading, that we would honor and reflect Christ in our leadership. Participate in the sermon by encouraging the preacher. Those of you who nod in agreement, or laugh at bits of humor, or even muster up an occasional "Amen" when something really strikes you, you offer great encouragement to the preacher. And when you sing out, others around you are also encouraged.

Listen to these words from a pastor who was recently imprisoned for his faith in a country that is hostile to Christianity:

When we were in prison we sang almost every day because Christ was alive in us...they put chains on our hands and feet. They chained us to add to our grief. Yet we discovered that chains are splendid musical instruments! When we clanged them together in rhythm, we could sing, 'This is the day (clink, clank), this is the day (clink, clank), which the Lord has made (clink, clank), which the Lord has made (clink, clank).'¹²

I'm telling you, whether you are in prison or in the pews of your church on Sunday morning, it is powerfully encouraging to look around you and see so many others passionately singing what they believe, believing it not just with their words but with their bodies. I have always been encouraged when I am surrounded by others who sing like this to God.

Fourth, when we sing together we are united. One of the most tragic things that can happen in a church is when music brings division. Sadly, it happens all the time. Churches split over what has sometimes been called 'worship wars.' Or, congregations stay together but divide on Sunday mornings along lines of musical preference. I understand why this happens and I know that there are some good reasons to create traditional services and contemporary services and so on, but I for one am grateful that we at Faith have made the decision to mix all our music together and remain committed to singing together, all generations and preferences at once. I think it's why Paul here says that we are to **"sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs"**. Biblical scholars aren't exactly sure what the distinctions between these types of music are, but they do agree that Paul's point is that we ought to sing a rich

¹¹ See Numbers 6:22-27

¹² See www.persecutionblog.com

variety of music in worship. Whenever you do something together it naturally brings unity. I don't underestimate the unifying power at work when each week, whether we each like the music or not, we join our hearts and voices in songs offered for the glory of God.

Fifth, we bear witness to others when we sing together.

Psalm 105:1-2 declare,

**O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.**

There are people who come to gather with us all the time who are not quite sure yet about Christ. They may be curious, they may be open, they may be seeking, but they are not yet trusting and following Jesus. We love when they are here. And one of the ways we bear witness to God's love and to our love for God is in our singing. Just as passionate worship helps us encourage one another as Christians, it can also help encourage those who do not yet believe. Just imagine the impression given to somebody who sees a congregation singing half-heartedly in worship, almost as if they don't really believe the words they are singing. By contrast, imagine the difference when somebody witnesses a congregation singing with great passion and sincerity. It can be a profound witness to others.

Sixth, we make war on evil when we sing. My son just read a book about a world-class long distance runner who would break his opponents by running up just behind them at the most grueling part of the race and starting to sing. It always worked. You're in agony in this race and your opponent just behind you is singing! Martin Luther once wrote, "Music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching . . . Music drives away the Devil and fills people with joy . . . We know that to the devil, music is distasteful and insufferable." For all the reasons I've already given, I believe that there may be no more distasteful sound in the ears of evil than the sound of song offered in sincere praise to Christ!

Finally, music has the power to reach places in us that spoken words cannot easily reach. Do you remember what it was in *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* that made the Grinch's heart grow three sizes that day? He'd just stolen everything from the Whos down in Whoville that Christmas, every present under the tree, every item prepared for the feast, down to the last can of Who-hash. And yet when he strains his ear to listen to what he expects will be sounds of their misery as they awake to discover Christmas has been stolen, he hears instead a most astonishing noise rising from the valley, the

sound of singing. In a moment everything changes. There is power in music, even to grow our hearts three sizes in one day!

Science has shown that the brain structures activated by music are the same regions linked to other euphoric stimuli such as food, sex and drugs. Blood flow in the brain rises and falls to swells of music associated with reward, emotion or arousal.¹³ There is power in music. As a preacher I'm well aware that there are ways that we experience God's grace through music that we don't often experience through the spoken word. In other words, music and preaching inspire in very different ways in worship and so both are necessary. I see it as a partnership and am regularly amazed at how often the message of sermon is driven home by a song. To quote Martin Luther again, "Next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise. The gift of language combined with the gift of song was given to man that he should proclaim the Word of God through music."

So, have you been encouraged? Maybe even some of you who don't usually sing are even encouraged enough that you're ready to consider making a joyful noise? When we sing together in worship we bring glory to God. The music shapes our thinking and, in turn, our lives. We encourage one another. We experience deeper unity. We bear witness to others. We mock evil to its face. And we find our hearts moved in ways that otherwise they might not be moved.

And yet, even after all those reasons, I suspect that some of you will still say to me. "Jeff, I don't sing because I don't have a good voice." Of all the excuses for not singing in worship that I hear from people this is by far the most common. If that's your reason for not singing and you can show me even one place in scripture where it specifies in all the commands to sing that such commands are given only to those who can carry a tune, then I'll leave you be.

Do you know what prerequisite the scriptures *do give* for those who should sing to God in worship? Psalm 150:6, the very last verse of the Psalms, makes it clear: **"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."** So here's a simple little test you can give yourself to see if you are somebody who should be singing in worship: Check to see if you are breathing. If you are breathing, you pass the test. Welcome to the choir.

I find it interesting that if you meet somebody who goes to another church and you ask them, "How is the music ministry at that church?" they will likely tell you about the music director, or the worship band, or the choir, or the organist. I've been guilty of giving that sort of

¹³ See <https://www.livescience.com/32473-why-do-we-love-music.html>

answer myself. It occurred to me this week, however, that such an answer betrays the foundational purpose of music in worship in the church. The most important music in the church never happens up front, but out in the congregation.

Now, I'm not saying that the musicians among us who lead us every week don't serve a vital role in our worship; they certainly do! And we are fortunate to have so many in this congregation who lead us so well, inspiring us week after week to sing a new song to God. But if a congregation has the best choir or band in town but the people of that church, as a whole, only sing half-heartedly at best, that congregation simply does not have a quality music ministry. At the same time, if you have a church full of tone-deaf singers who have no talented musicians among them to lead them and zero instruments to accompany them, but they sing nonetheless to God together with all their hearts, well that is a music ministry that is full of power and grace.

"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!" If you have breath this morning that very breath is a gift from God. One of the best ways you can use that gift is to sing praises to God in worship.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Colossians 3:12-17 again. Pay attention to what you notice here.
2. Focus on verse 16. Why do you think Paul includes this exhortation to sing to God in his discussion on letting the word of Christ dwell in your richly? How are these two connected?
3. Do you sing in worship? If so, why do you sing? If not, why not?
4. What do you make of the fact that the command to sing praise to God is the second most often repeated command in scripture?
5. Consider the seven reasons given for singing praise to God in worship: to glorify God; to shape us; to encourage one another; to be united; to bear witness; to make war on evil; to reach our hearts. Which reason is the most compelling to you?

6. Jeff said that we should be grateful for music in worship that isn't in line with personal tastes because it reminds us that worship isn't about us? Do you agree? Do you share this gratitude?
7. After listening to this message, what factors do you think make for a good music ministry in a church?
8. How has this message changed your understanding of music in worship? How will that change be reflected in your life?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why do we sing in church?
Who would God command us to sing to him?
What happens when we do?