

God is Like.... Our Conductor

Psalm 147:1-7, Ephesians 5:18-20

June 2, 2019 Music Sunday

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

What music moves you? What do you listen on the radio? What kind of concerts do you like to go to? What cd's do you have? What songs are on your playlist iTunes or Spotify?

I am grateful to have had so much music in my life – school, church, churches I have served. Choir directors, piano teachers, voice teachers. Some of us love to listen to music and others make music and some of us both.

Music often takes us where words alone can never quite go. Music is part of our emotional selves, and our physical selves, too.

I am fascinated by the neuroscience research about the brain and music.

Music has played an important part of every human culture, both past and present. People around the world respond to music in universal ways. And now, advances in neuroscience enable researchers to quantitatively measure just how music affects the brain. The interest in the effects of music on the brain has led to a new branch of research called neuromusicology which explores how the nervous system reacts to music. And the evidence is in — music activates every known part of the brain. Listening to and playing music can make you smarter, happier, healthier and more productive at all stages of life. (1)

Today we celebrate our music ministry and give thanks for our singers, bell ringers and choir directors and musicians. Our congregation is blessed with amazing music and opportunities to sing together in worship in different styles.

The Bible is full music. The Psalms are a collection of poems and songs sung by the Hebrew people cover the range of communal joys and challenges. Praising God, songs of lament, songs of thanks, giving thanks to God for music.

Paul Westermeyer, Professor of Church Music at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. has studied the human voice and singing in church He wrote:

Joy inevitably breaks into song. Speech alone cannot carry its hilarity. The physical equipment we use to laugh is the physical equipment we use to sing. From laughter to song is a small step. To praise God, the highest form of joy, is to make music...Sorrow also inevitably breaks into song. Speech alone cannot carry its moan. The physical equipment we use to cry is also the physical equipment we use to sing. From mourning to song is but a small step. To cry out to God in lament, the deepest form of sorrow, is to make music. (2)

Speech is often not enough. One of my favorite passages comes at end of the Last Supper. Here is Mark's description.

23 Then Jesus took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. 24 He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. (Mark 14:23-26)

Before they go to Gethsemane to pray, before they face Jesus' arrest and the cross, before they leave the place of bread and cup, Jesus sings with his disciples. He wanted them to sing together. It would bind them together. He needed to sing with them to face the reality of his death and love.

Today I read a few verses from Ephesians 5. In this letter to early Christians, the people who follow Jesus' way, the church, are filled with God's spirit and their lives are different. The activities which flow as a result of the Spirit's work among the people. And this flows into people singing together. In hymns and songs, they expressed struggles and joys, faith and doubt. They were training one another to give voice to the life and faith of the church.

5:18-21 is actually one long sentence in Greek: "We are to be filled with the Spirit not through the intoxication of wine but the intoxication of worship, which involves the communal practices of singing to each other and to God, of singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, of making melody to the Lord, of giving thanks to God, and of submitting to one another" (Cooper's translation).

So we are wired to make music and the Bible is full of moments of music and singing. And there are many references to praising God with instruments. How might that shape an image or an experience of God?

Over the years I have been to many band and music concerts at schools. It starts with the students playing recorders in second grade, then often piano, then choosing an instrument to play alone and then together, then bands, then orchestras and marching bands. But there is a person along the way for whom I have great admiration and respect. And it got me thinking.

God is a lot like a middle school orchestra teacher.

God listens to our screeching,
hangs in there when our instruments are out of tune,
reminds us that we can't always be the soloist,
helps us take the music and interpret it
draws us into the music of creation.

So if one image of God is that of a middle school orchestra teacher and music is central to praising and worshipping God, what does it mean to worship God on Sunday mornings with music?

Often I think people think of it this way

The usual view of worship is that

The choir and pastor are the actors,
God is the prompter
And the congregation is the audience watching.

But that is not true. I have always like Soren Kierkegaard's metaphor for worship. He was a theologian in the 1600's who wrote about worship. What it seems to be and what it is.

Worship isn't God's show. God is the audience. God's watching. The congregation, they are the actors in this drama. Worship is their show. And the minister is just reminding the people of their forgotten lines.

Worship is truly worship when we see that

The people in the congregation are the actors,
The pastor is director and prompter
And God is the audience.

Today I would tweak that a little. The people sitting in the congregation are the singers, the chorus, along with the choir. I am the vocal coach to encourage you to sing out. And God is still the audience. Maybe I should change my title - "Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, Congregational Vocal Coach."

I am more and more convinced that singing together as a congregation and in community is deeply important. It matters.

Singing helps being a stronger community. The very act of singing teaches us who we are: The variety of voices—high pitched or low pitched, on-key or off-key, some soaring to the rafters and others barely above a whisper—reminds us of the wonderful diversity in the Church.

Why do we sing in church? A friend shared a story. A person told me about a worship service in which the congregation sang a hymn that she did not like at all. Shrugging her shoulders, she decided to sing it joyfully anyway. After worship the woman standing next to her confessed, "I was really feeling discouraged when I came to church. I'm dealing with a lot of personal problems. But when we started singing those hymns and I heard you singing so joyfully next to me, you sounded like you really meant what you were singing. I started thinking about the words of that hymn, and it made me feel better." We sing not only for ourselves, but also out of love for others. (3)

We sing in the midst of shared grief. We sing at memorial services when words are not enough to carry our sadness and loss. When the horrific shootings at the Tree of Life synagogue took place in Pittsburgh, I saw on line a hymn that one of my writers wrote in response. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette wrote a hymn of lament "O God This Day We Grieve." I made copies on Saturday night and asked our music director if she thought we could sing it. We decided yes. The congregation at First Presbyterian Garden Grove was moved by the power of the words that expressed our grief and outrage. (4)

Another reason to sing together is there is power of congregational song to promote empathy. Congregational singing brings the whole assembly into sense of empathy with one another. We can also think about that empathy scientifically; indeed researchers are discovering that singing together not only builds stronger social/psychological bonds, but that singing together for an extended period of time actually causes people's breathing and heartbeats to synchronize. Singing together creates literal, physiological empathy.

And there is power express diversity and hospitality. We sing music from a variety of cultures and languages. Sometimes we sing in English and Spanish, A few weeks ago we sang - Come All You People – Uyai mose, tinamate Mwari. I learned this song that is from Christians in Zimbabwe from John Bell who is from Scotland!

Music can move us to action, to movements, solidarity.

And there are times we sing songs of lament. So many days recently I want to sing a lament, the blues – over the violence and hate, the mass killings and lack of change policy changes, the ongoing violence in many families and communities, the realities of climate change, national parks in danger of are under serious attack, encroached upon by private industries anxious to log, drill, and mine. Coming church is not only a time to sing of hope but sometimes it is to share and sing our collective grief, our anger at the ways we are not loving our neighbors or our planet. And singing can move us to action.

Turning to music that both comforts us and challenges us and inspires us on our spiritual is central to our ongoing transformation and growth as people of faith who seek to follow Jesus. Remember after he came to the table he sang with his friends.

So let's imagine today that God is like the conductor.
One who teaches us to play the melody of love, of compassion, joy and sorrow.
Learn to sing and play – hear our voice, our instrument, but listen to others.
Life is not a performance. Being in worship is not a performance.
All are welcome and sing and play and make mistakes and practice.

God is like that the middle school orchestra teacher
who helps you to know how to hold the instrument in the first place,
and convinces you that you are a musician
that you can do this, that you have it in you.

The members of each choir, and their directors have been given special gifts from God. They are able to express faith through music. They give extra time and effort to this ministry. You and I are the glad beneficiaries of their special calling. Through their ministry of music, they bring God closer to us and they bring us closer to God.

They teach me and you, on any given Sunday morning, that singing or ringing changes things. We are changed. Sometimes they sing for us. Sometimes they sing with us. But this music that we make each Sunday...it is a vital part of what helps us open those doors and go back out into the world. Into a world where there is still evil and hate and injustice be defeated and where there are still joys unimagined to be experienced.

May God be our conductor, helping us hear the melody of hope in the Risen Christ. We pick up an instrument of faith, we stay with it. We find our voice. We practice. We watch and listen to the conductor. And over time, we can be changed, transformed and we make the music we were meant to play and invite others to join us. Amen.

- 1) "How Music Affects the Brain," Be Brain Fit, 5/18/19
<https://bebrainfit.com/music-brain/>
- 2) Quoted in Brain Wren's book: *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000, p.83
- 3) Jonathan Hehn, "Why We Minister," University of Norte Dame, July 2018.
<https://sites.nd.edu/examine/2018/07/12/why-we-minister-jonathan-hehn/>
- 4) Link to hymn by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. https://www.carolynshymns.com/o_god_this_day_we_grieve.html