

“What Music Teaches Us”
Colossians 3:12-17

January 23, 2022 Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

In one of my theology classes in seminary, the professor asked the class who has left the bigger impact on the church: John Wesley, or his brother Charles Wesley? John, who founded the Methodist Church, seems like obvious answer. Thousands of churches all over the world trace their life back to his writings, preaching, and theology. But how many of us have ever actually read any of his works? If you are a Methodist you probably have, but for most of us, we can’t give you too many quotes from him.

Charles, on the other hand, millions upon millions of people these past centuries know his words. Because he was a songwriter. And he wrote some of the most famous hymns we still sing today. Whether or not you read theology or even pay close attention or not in worship, you probably remember a lot of his lyrics, from Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus, to Hark! The Herald Angels Sing, to Christ the Lord is Risen Today, to O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.

Because music sticks with us. Music teaches us and reminds us and journeys with us, not just on Sunday mornings but throughout our week. Your earliest understandings of God and messages you have kept probably came from music. I know when we plan worship each Tuesday that what everyone is going to be remembering the most from that service that week is not the best line of my sermon. But instead, it is going to be final hymn or two. Come Tuesday or Wednesday of this week, do not be surprised if you are still singing or humming Holy, Holy, Holy or When in Our Music God is Glorified. I always want that final hymn to connect with the message, because that is what you are going to remember most of all.

But even more than lyrics in the songs, music teaches us something directly, even when its instrumental, even when all we can remember is the tune.

Music tells us that we follow a God of beauty, a God of creativity, and a God of love, and that God delights in our acts of love and worship.

I very much believe one of the early mistakes of the Reformation was in getting rid of so much music. Those early reformers tore out organs, got rid of choirs, and cast out beautiful sacred music, because they thought it got in the way of the true message of God's love and grace. But what they missed is that music is part of the witness of God. It reminds us that we don't serve a distant, cold, uncaring God, but a loving, joyful one, who loves us immensely, and wants us to know joy, and delight, worship and connection.

A couple of weeks ago in putting together this service celebrating the 20 years of music ministry of Steve Henley, I asked Steve what he hoped people would remember and treasure most about his service to the church. And he said that he hoped people would remember him as a teacher. Every Sunday in worship Steve has taught us about God, about ourselves, about our connection with this wider world. He also has taught Sunday school classes on the Psalms and the Messiah. He has taught Summer Music Camp here each summer for children and youth. And I know Steve treasures so much his time teaching piano for the youth at Bon Air Juvenile Correctional Facility. I think Steve has a little apprehensive his first time or two in there, unsure how the men of that place would respond to his presence. But soon he found how excited and grateful they were, and how much the gift of music was especially needed in that place.

But I actually think Steve's legacy is less as a teacher, and more as something else. I think what Steve did for so many people is connect them. Connect us with worship. Connect us to a closer relationship to God. Connect us to our own gifts of music and praise. Connect us in deeper relationships with one another.

When I asked what message Steve would like people to take away most from his ministry here, he said back, "Don't be afraid of church." Steve spoke how so many people have either a view of church or even of God as this place of judgement or coldness. But what Steve has found, and I think created at BAPC too, is that church is a place of friends. Church is a place of welcome, whatever your journey has been. Church is a place for you to know that God wants to be in relationship with you, and that people here want to be in relationship with you too. Church is a place of community.

And his favorite thing about worship is that it is not 100 of us doing 100 different things. But that it is each Sunday 100 of us joining together as one body. Steve said, "It's not you that is singing. It's the church that is singing."

I know that Steve has preached here, including this past fall. But it's not just those Sundays that Steve has offered us a message. It is every Sunday, through song and music, through welcoming us with a prelude or directing the choir, or welcoming us forward to communion with the perfect selection that lets us know this table is for all of us.

Paul invites us today to teach with gratitude in our hearts, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. Paul does so because he knows what a gift music can be. It revives the soul. It bridges divides. It reminds us of grace and love. And it gives witness to a God of beauty, of creativity, and love.

For twenty years, Steve has been showing us that truth, and filling us with that gift. As we go forward, may we carry on that legacy. By singing out loud. By using our own gifts. By trusting that when we come here, we meet a God of love and joy. By encouraging one another. And by witnessing in all we do that church is not a place to be afraid of. But a place to be connected to God, to one another, and to our greater world. We thank you Steve for reminding us all what a huge gift music can be. Amen.