

“Music in the Church”

Eph. 5:18-20

6/7/20

As we continue our series in the book of Ephesians, you may notice that we’ve jumped ahead a bit, skipping over chapters 3 & 4! The reason is simple: I don’t like chapters 3 & 4! Not really! If you’ve been reading along in Ephesians- and I’m sure you have!- you’ll know that we covered most of the content in chapters 3 & 4 in our last series on the Holy Spirit. That brings us to a brief section today about Christian worship. And, that’s a timely topic! As we are making plans about how and when to re-open face-to-face worship, we are running into important questions about the nature of worship. What things can we change or omit in our worship services to protect ourselves from the Coronavirus, and what can’t be changed?

In particular, we are wrestling with the issue of congregational singing. Some denominations and other church councils are advising churches to forego congregational singing when they resume public worship, because of the potential to spread the virus. You see, singing requires vigorous expelling of air and deep breathing. Others believe that with social distancing and masks, the risk is minimal. All of this raises an important question: Can you even have Christian worship without singing? What would be left? And, what role does singing play in worship?

This morning’s passage sheds a little light on these questions. It begins a little strangely, but stay with me! ¹⁸*Do not get drunk with wine, for*

that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, ²⁰giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph. 5:18-20)

The first verse warns against getting drunk, which seems odd in the context of these verses about worship! But Paul is concluding a long section showing distinctions between the new life in Christ and their old ways of living as idol worshipers. Pagan worship also had religious rites with singing, and they often featured drunkenness and debauchery. In contrast to those old ways of worship, Paul calls the Ephesian Christians to be filled with the Spirit (not spirits!). And that filling of the Spirit is manifested in singing.

Particularly, Paul says we sing “Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” The early church possessed the Hebrew Psalms, the Psalms in our Bible, and they sang them. We used one as the Call to Worship to begin our service today, *“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.”* (Ps. 96:1-2) Like many of the Psalms, it calls us to sing!

The early Christians sang these Psalms, as well as other new Christian hymns and spiritual songs when they gathered for worship. It’s interesting that new movements of the Spirit throughout the history of the

church have resulted in outpourings of new songs! The Protestant Reformation restored congregational singing to worship and resulted in many new songs by Luther and other Reformers. In fact, Luther is quoted as saying, “I have no use for cranks who despise music, because it is a gift of God. Next after theology, I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.” The Great Awakening revival movements in our country also resulted in new songs by Isaac Watts, John and Charles Wesley, and others. And, the Jesus movement and the Charismatic renewal movement in the 1960’s resulted in the beginning of contemporary Christian music. We still sing songs taken from all of those movements of the Spirit today!

So, Paul says that the filling of the Spirit leads us to sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in the church. And then he says two interesting things about this singing. First, notice that little phrase, “among yourselves” in verse 19. “Sing...among yourselves,” he says. Other translators emphasize this aspect of singing by translating verse 19, “*Speak to one another with Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs...*” (NIV)

The point is that there is a horizontal dimension to singing in church. We sing “among ourselves” or “to one another.” One of our members captured the meaning of this aspect of singing when she told me this week that although she is enjoying the live stream worship services, she really misses all of us singing together in worship. There is comfort and strength

that comes to her as she hears others affirming their faith in the songs. I think that's true for many of us.

Some of you may have heard of the concept of “collective effervescence.” It was coined by sociologist, Emile Durkheim. According to Durkheim, when communities or societies come together and simultaneously communicate the same thought and participate in the same action, it causes “collective effervescence.” It excites individuals and serves to unify the group. That's what happens when we sing together! Something happens that is greater than just a bunch of individual voices being raised in the same room! We are lifted up and unified together. That's the horizontal dimension of singing. It's very important. But there's more.

Paul calls us to “*make melody in our hearts to the Lord, giving thanks to God the Father...*” (Eph. 5:19b-20a) This is the vertical dimension of singing- singing that is directed to God. As strange as it may be, I fear we sometimes lose sight of the vertical dimension of singing and worship. Mark Powell tells of a time when as a pastor, he decided to visit all the inactive members of his congregation to see if he could encourage some of them to come back to church. He visited about 50 families! He heard lots of reasons why people had stopped coming to church, ranging from complaints about the liturgy, church politics, and personal conflicts in the

congregation. Some thought the church was too liberal, others, not contemporary enough, or just plain boring. All of them told him in one way or another, that the church just “wasn’t meeting their needs.”

Powell said that this surprised him, because as a child, his mother used to tell him each Sunday, “Get ready for church. We’re going to worship God.” He remarks that it never occurred to him that he was supposed to get something out of it! Even at a young age, he understood that worship wasn’t about him; It was about God. That’s the vertical dimension of worship and of singing. It is setting aside time each week to thank and praise God. As we sang in our opening hymn, “Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving To God the Creator triumphantly raise.” That’s the vertical dimension of singing.

Paul calls us to sing Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another and in praise of God. That’s the role of music and singing in the church. And it is a powerful part of worship, because songs have emotional power. You’ve probably heard a particular pop song and been moved to great joy, or reduced to tears very quickly! Church songs have the power to do that, too. They *create* feelings within us as well as *express* our feelings, all while using words that articulate our beliefs, our hopes, our fears, and our joys. And all those feelings and thoughts and beliefs are amplified when we sing together as a congregation.

As wonderful as our live stream services are- and I believe they are a gift from God for all of us during this time- as wonderful as they are, they are missing something very important to Christian worship- the congregational singing that Paul talks about in Eph. 5. So I am looking forward to the time when we can sing together again!