Sunday, June 25, 1995
PRAISING GOD WITH MUSIC
Psalm 150

Music is such an integral part of our regular Saturday evening and Sunday worship services that we often take it for granted.

It is possible, of course, to worship, praise, and glorify God without music of any kind. Any spoken or unspoken prayer or thought of God or loving one's neighbor is a way of praising and glorifying God and therefore worship. According to our Christian faith, the main purpose of existence for human beings is "to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

But it is nonetheless a significant fact that the experience of the church throughout its history has been that when people gather to worship God, music is heard. It is natural for the human spirit to resort to music when worshipping because music taps into the deepest and strongest emotions of human beings.

The Old and New Testaments of the Bible are filled with injunctions for the use of music of all kinds in our praise of God. "Sing unto the Lord!" "Praise God with trumpet sound. Praise God with lute and harp. Praise God with tambourine and dance. Praise God with strings and pipe. Praise God with clanging cymbals; praise God with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord."

Thus it should not surprise us that until the death of Bach in 1750, the mainstream of the development of music was in the church. Popular and folk music was, of course, always in existence, but serious composers almost unanimously received their inspiration from and dedicated their works to the glory of God.

Today in our country, church worship services are one of the few regular places where people of all ages gather to sing and to listen to and be inspired by music.

The Psalms in the Bible are, for the most part, ancient songs. In Hinduism, the tradition teaches that all beautiful sound is from God. Thus musical sound and musical experience are steps to the realization of the self, and music is viewed as a kind of spiritual discipline that raises one's inner self to divine bliss and peacefulness.

Music was held in such high esteem in all parts of Hebrew life, the culture into which Jesus was born and grew up, that when the prophets had occasion to warn the people of the consequences of their evil ways, they could find no more vivid figure to suggest the desolation that would come upon them than to say there would be no "singing in the land!"

And when the prophets wished to give people hope when the spirit of song had been silenced by their sorrows, the best way to inspire them was to promise that if they would forsake their evil ways and return to God, there would again be singing in the land.

In our Protestant tradition, Martin Luther in particular is notable among the leaders of the church who emphasized the use of music in worship. He was keenly aware of the power music could have in the life of the church. He wrote, "For whenever you wish to comfort the sad, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or appease those full of hate, what more effective means than music could you find?"

Luther also believed that the devil was helpless against the power of good music. To the devil, the originator of depressing worries and troubled thoughts, music was something altogether hateful and unbearable. He said, “Satan is hostile to all music and will not remain near it, for music is always a joyful creation, issuing from hearts overflowing with gladness.”

On the other hand, Luther was harsh on those who did not appreciate the worth of music in worship. He bluntly stated: “A person who does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being. He should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of donkeys and the grunting of hogs.”

Music in all ages has given human beings a sense of the mystical and a connection with the transcendent and the universal. It binds us together in new harmonies.

Aaron Copland, the composer, put it this way: “I have been concerned with the creation of music for more than thirty years, with no lessening of my sense of humility before the majesty of music’s expressive power, before its capacity to make manifest a deeply spiritual resource of mankind.”

Plato said, “Music is moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, a charm to sadness, gaiety and life to everything. It is the essence of order and leads to all that is good, just, and beautiful, of which it is the invisible, but nevertheless dazzling, passionate, and eternal form.” And Tchaikovsky said, “Music is not illusion, but revelation. Its triumphant power resides in the fact that it reveals to us beauties we find nowhere else, and the apprehension of them is not transitory, but a perpetual reconcilement to life.”

One of the things for which I am most grateful is that I grew up in a family that had a love for music — church music, dance music, choral music, and folk music.

I am also thankful for the rich heritage of music in this church. It was a love and appreciation of music that inspired this congregation to build and install the first carillon in this part of the country in 1930-31, and it remains one of the finest in the world. Two of the world’s leading living carillon players, Milford Myhre and Ronald Barnes, learned on First-Plymouth’s instrument.

The pipe organ in the old Plymouth Church building at 17th and A was one of the finest in its day. And the original pipe organ in this building, built in 1931, made a major contribution to the entire community, as has our present pipe organ, which was built and installed in 1966, along with the organ in the chapel.

Reading the history of First-Plymouth Church and its music ministry in Lincoln is like reading the history of the leading musicians in the University of Nebraska and the City of Lincoln.

There was Carrie Bell Raymond, who was the church’s music director for 40 years, Myron Roberts, organist from 1940 to 1956, and Dr. Arthur E. Westbrook, director of music in the church from 1940 to 1955. Both of these men were also distinguished professors of music at the University of Nebraska. Other well-known music leaders who served First-Plymouth Church were Wilbur Chenoweth, who was also a distinguished faculty member in the music school of the University of Nebraska, H.T. Rangeler, and Josephine Waddell.

Today, no history of distinguished music leadership in this church and in the City of Lincoln would be complete without the contributions of Jack Levick, who has been our Minister of Music and Fine Arts now for 23 years, and hopefully for many more.

With the new Lied Organ, which is really two organs and is now under construction by the Schoenstein Organ Company in San Francisco, we are continuing to build on the vision and heritage of being a major contributor to the music life in our community. It is because of this history and the outreach of our music program that the Lied Foundation Trust made its grant of $600,000 to the church for the building and installation of the new pipe organ. The Lied grant is contingent on our raising an equal amount. It is also the reason that Ruth Amen made her large commitment of $250,000 for the balcony organ, which is a major part of the new organ project. With the addition of these two organs, which can be played as one, we will be able to extend our outreach into the community.

As many of you already know, when I first talked with Ms. Christina Hixson, the trustee of the Lied Foundation Trust, she told me quite bluntly that she didn't want to help buy a new organ for First-Plymouth Church. And I responded by saying, "I don't want you to help buy an organ for our congregation. I am asking you to help finance an organ for the community. It will be housed in our church building."

Do we need a new pipe organ? In the narrowest practical sense, the answer is "no." Our present organ, including the one in the balcony, does need major reconstructive work if it's going to continue to be used. And we do need more space in the chancel, which our new organ design provides. Furthermore, the new organ will architecturally match the building in the same way as our new building addition.

If we want to be completely practical, we don't even need the present organ. We could use a piano, or we could even sing without any musical instruments to lead us. We don't need this beautiful church building, but I'm thankful every day for what it adds to our lives and to the life of this community. We don't need the nice homes we live in, the carpeting and the drapes. We don't need the cars we drive. We don't need air conditioning in our homes and automobiles. For years, we lived without it. My mother cooked on a wood stove all year long and heated the water for the washing machine on a wood stove in the basement. Did my mother need the electric hot water heater when we finally got one? Did she need the electric stove?

We don't need the Lincoln Orchestra Association, or the Public Libraries, or the Lincoln Community Playhouse, or the Lied Performing Arts Center, but they all add something to our life together. I wouldn't want to live in a community without these cultural enrichments. Would you?

The motivation for having good literature, for fine arts, comfortable homes, flower gardens, and beautiful landscaping is the same motivation as our project with "Habitat for Humanity," where as a church community, we work with others to provide good quality housing for people who otherwise might not have it. It's not either/or; it's both/and!

How then can you be a part of this project? So that everyone can participate in this historic project, we are going to give people the opportunity to buy one or more organ pipes as their contribution.

Here I want to be personal and tell you what my wife and I are going to do and why we are going to do it. We are going to make a major contribution because I believe this organ project

will benefit the church and the wider community for countless years to come. It will enrich the religious and cultural life of thousands of people.

Since we have three children and seven grandchildren, we are going to give one organ pipe in honor of each one of them — a total of ten pipes in all. Each pipe in this project can be donated for a gift of $500. So our beginning gift will be $5,000. Each person in whose honor or in whose memory a pipe is donated will be given a beautifully inscribed certificate suitable for framing, and their names will be engraved on a plaque in this building.

We are also making this contribution for a very personal reason. We want our children and grandchildren to remain connected to this church for as long as they live in some tangible way. No matter where they might live in the future, we want our children and grandchildren to know of their continuing connection to this church and through it to the Christian faith.

I believe many members and friends of First-Plymouth will want to donate one or more organ pipes for the same reasons. I invite as many of you as desire to join us in this effort.

This week you will receive in the mail very detailed information on how you can do this.

There are many ways of praising and glorifying God which enrich the life of all of us, and music has always been one of them.

Thanks be to God. Amen.