Sunday, November 9, 1997
THE MINISTRY OF MUSIC
Psalm 95:1-5, 96:1-6

Music is such an important and universal ingredient in the worship of God that we can take it for granted. Today, as we honor Jack Levick, our Minister of Music, on his 25th year of ministry in our midst, we are going to consider again the contribution which music makes in our worship of God.

First, let's very briefly examine the history of music in worship. It is possible, of course, to worship God without music of any kind. Any spoken or unspoken prayer or thought of God is worship.

It is nonetheless a significant fact that the experience of the church in all ages has been that when people worship, music is heard. This was as true of King David in the Old Testament, as it was of the Christian wherever he or she worshiped with others. It is natural for the human spirit to resort to music when worshiping because worship enlists the deepest and strongest emotions, and so does music. We are talking about those emotions which go beyond words and demand greater expression.

Thus the Old and New Testaments in the Bible are filled with injunctions for the use of music of all kinds in our praise of God. Music is like prayer. Its purpose is not to change God, but to change us. "Sing unto the Lord!" is the constant invitation of the Psalmist. In the New Testament, St. Paul urges the churches to "praise God in Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs."

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

Today, in this country and in other parts of the world, church worship services are one of the few regular places where people of all ages gather to sing and listen to music. People who do not sing are the poorer for it.

The Protestant Reformation, which found its center in Martin Luther and which we commemorate each year on the last Sunday in October, began with a rebirth of congregational singing.

Luther was keenly aware of the power music could have in the life of the church. He said, "For whenever you wish to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, 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 music. Luther, who credited the devil with being the originator of depressing worries and troubled thoughts, was sure that music was to the devil altogether hateful and unbearable. He said, "When Satan sorely presses you, go out and drink wine, tell lively jokes, and play music. 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."

Luther also realized the importance of trained choirs in leading congregations in worship. He put it this way: “When natural music is sharpened and polished by art, then one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in His wonderful work of music, where one voice takes a simple part and around it sing three, four, or five other voices, leaping and springing round about, marvelously gracing the simple part, like a square dance in heaven, with friendly bows, embracings, and the hearty swinging of partners.”

He was harsh on those who did not appreciate the worth of music in worship. Luther 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.”

The Psalms in the Bible are for the most part ancient songs. In Hinduism, the tradition teaches that beautiful sound found especially in music is God. Musical sound and musical experience are steps to the realization of the self, and music can be understood as a kind of spiritual discipline that raises one’s inner self to divine peacefulness and bliss.

The singing of hymns is as old as our faith, and we inherited it from our Jewish ancestors. For more than 19 centuries, Christians have sung hymns. In the upper room, in prisons, in the catacombs, in monastery chapels, vast cathedrals, camp meetings, revivals, rural churches, city churches, and in other places, hymns of prayer and praise have been sung.

First-Plymouth Congregational Church has always been aware of the important contribution music makes in the worship of God and has been a leader in this community in the making of beautiful music.

First Congregational Church, organized in 1866, dedicated its second church building at 13th and L in 1887. One of the features of this new building was its pipe organ, one of the first in the city. Carrie Bell Raymond became the church organist and served as organist and director of music for 40 years. The largest bell in our carillon is in her memory.

In 1887, First Congregational Church also organized Plymouth Congregational Church, located at 17th and A. Very quickly, Plymouth Congregational Church had its own distinction in the ministry of music. One of its priorities was to have a fine pipe organ in its building, and it did. Also, during the season of 1895-96, six musical events for the church and community were planned by the Plymouth Choir of that congregation. The price for all six musicals was 50 cents for a season ticket, and 10 cents per musical without a season ticket. It was the forerunner of Abendmusik.

First Congregational Church and Plymouth Congregational Church merged in 1923, and the music ministry took on an expanded role, especially when this building was completed in 1931. A new pipe organ and carillon were a big help in the ministry of music.

Some of Jack Levick’s predecessors as minister of music were Wilbur Chenoweth, who was a professor in the University of Nebraska School of Music, H.T. Rangeler, and Josephine Waddell. In 1940, Dr. Arthur Westbrook, Chairman of the Department of Music at the University of Nebraska, began a long association with the church as Director of Music, with Myron Roberts as the organist, who was also a professor at the University.

When Westbrook and Roberts retired, First-Plymouth began employing a full-time minister of music, and this tradition has continued. Richard Morris had this position when I arrived in January 1972, and in September of 1972, Jack Levick began his ministry of music here.

During this 25-year period, the ministry of music in First-Plymouth, in the church, and in the community, has continued to grow and expand. Jack has continued to build and expand on the solid foundation that was here. The carillon has been renovated and expanded, and its bells continue to ring in the city. It's no accident that two of the premier carillon bell players in this country learned the art here: Milford Myhre and Ronald Barnes. During the past 25 years, we have added a number of handbell choirs, children and youth choirs, the Plymouth Brass, and the Abendmusik: Lincoln Concert Series is celebrating its silver anniversary. Our Plymouth Choir this past summer did its second European concert tour.

We are now in the midst of the addition of two new pipe organs: one in the balcony, which is complete, and the one in the chancel, which is under construction. When completed, these two organs will be among the finest in the country. Jack has been instrumental in the design of these new organs.

Today, in both worship services, we are having Jack sit in the congregation so that he can experience from our perspective what music under his direction has done and continues to do to glorify God.

It has been a personal joy and privilege for me to work with Jack in this congregation during the past 25 years. I've always said that if I ever moved from this congregation to another one, I would not do so unless that church also employed Jack as the minister of music. Amen.