Sunday, May 23, 1999
THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MUSIC
John 20:19-23

At the center of the Christian faith is the proclamation: “The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14).

This means that not only do we come to know God more fully in the person of Jesus, but we also continue to experience God among us in human terms — in other human beings, in our relationships with one another, and in human culture.

To affirm that a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, incarnates God is mysterious enough. But the writer of the Gospel of John goes on to proclaim that after the human Jesus has left the world, the Holy Spirit represents His ongoing presence. Even more amazing, this Spirit is revealed in the church, a human structure. John’s Gospel reports: “Jesus breathed on them (His followers) and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.'”

The book of Acts tells the same story in a slightly different way: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place... and all of them (the followers of Jesus) were filled with the Holy Spirit.”

There are, of course, times when the church has not acted, and does not act, very Christ-like. But this should not surprise us. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we “have this treasure in earthen vessels.” While God’s Spirit lives and works within us and among us, it does not make us perfect.

One of the many ways in which the Spirit of God continues to be revealed is through music — not only what we call church music but also some of what we call “popular” music. Not all popular music reveals God’s Spirit because music can also be demonic. How we experience God’s Spirit through some popular music is a theme for another sermon. The important point to remember is that people have always used their artistic creations, including music, to worship God and instruct others about God. The Bible is filled with songs of all kinds.

So today, on this Pentecost Sunday, when we remember the many ways God’s Spirit works in and among us, we are noting, in particular, how that Spirit nurtures and inspires us through music. In doing so, we express our appreciation and gratitude to the many people in our midst who give of their time and energy to lead us in making music.

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 love for one’s neighbor is a way of praising and glorifying God and is, therefore, worship.

Nevertheless, it is significant that throughout the church’s history, when people gather to worship God, music of one kind or another is heard. It is natural for human beings to resort to music when worshiping because music taps into our deepest and strongest emotions.

From the beginning of creation, music has been an integral part of life. It has been linked with birth, death, dancing, work, and worship — and it still is. You sing as you put your children to

sleep. You whistle while you work. You hum a tune. You dance for joy. Music can cheer you up. It can make you cry.

The Old and New Testaments are filled with injunctions to use music of all varieties to praise 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!”

Music — singing together, using one’s breath to praise God — was held in such high regard in the culture in which Jesus was born and grew up that when the prophets warned the people of the consequences of their evil ways, they could think of no more vivid figure to suggest the coming desolation than to say there would be “no singing in the land.”

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

To its credit, the church also took many popular songs and folk tunes and used them to worship God, and we still do that today. As Martin Luther said, “Why let the devil have all the good tunes?”

Luther also believed that the devil was helpless against the power of good music. According to Luther, to the devil, the originator of depressing worries and troubled thoughts, good music was something altogether hateful and unbearable. He said, “Satan is hostile to all good music and will not remain near it, for good 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. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. So today, we are made aware of God’s Holy Spirit in and among us through music. Amen.