Book 37

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 not only do we come to know God more fully in the person of Jesus but in addition that we continue to experience God among us in human terms, which is to say 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 and 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 in the Bible tells the same story in a little 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 times of course when the church has not and does not act very Christlike. But this should not surprise us. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we "have this treasure in earth vessels."

Because God's Spirit lives and works within us and among us that 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 in 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, people have always used their own artistic creations including music for the purpose of worshiping God and instructing 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 and in so doing we are expressing 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 loving one's neighbor is a way of praising and glorifying God and therefore is worship.

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 of one kind or another is heard. It is natural for the human being to resort to music when worshipping because music taps into the deepest and strongest emotions of human beings.

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 of the Bible are

filled with injuctions for the use of music of all varieties 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!"

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 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."

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 and folk music was of course always in existence, but the 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 of the so-called popular songs and folk tunes and used them in the worship of God and we're still doing that. As Martin Luther said, "Why let the devil have all the good tunes?"

Luther also believed the devil was helpless against the power of good music. According to

Luther, to the devil, the originator of depressing worries and troubled thought, 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.