

Have you ever wondered why we do what we do in worship? You know, stand up; sit down; stand up; sit down; close your eyes; sing; listen; fall asleep; wake up; stand up; and go home. There are many different forms of worship and they vary among denominations, churches and even within churches. Each preacher and church have their own order of worship that they are comfortable with. The ultimate goal is to provide an atmosphere of worship that allows each of us to grow closer in our personal relationship with the Lord.

So how would you define worship? What is it and why do we come here every Sunday morning? There are many theological definitions for worship, but to me worship is coming together to praise and thank God for all the many blessings that He has bestowed on us. But there also many other reasons such as seeking forgiveness, growing in our knowledge of God and His Son Jesus Christ, enjoying the fellowship of other believers, and even searching for God Himself.

Since we are celebrating the hymns of Fanny Crosby Sunday this morning, I want to focus on the important role of singing in worship. Now if you have ever heard me sing, you realize that I am taking on a subject that I know nothing about. However, John Wesley said to preach until you get it right; therefore, if I preach about it, maybe my singing might improve. When Judy and I taught Junior High Sunday School at St. John's UMC in Santa Fe, one of the young ladies in our class told me that God did not make a bucket big enough for me to carry a tune in. But the Bible tells us to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. So, while I may not be able to read music or carry a tune, hopefully I can make a joyful noise to the Lord.

Someone has said that there are three books necessary for advancing the kingdom of God – the Bible, the hymn book and the checkbook. It is said that Martin Luther has damned more souls with his hymns than with all his sermons. A. W. Tozer said that after the sacred Scriptures, the best companion for the soul is a good hymn book.

The practice of gathering together as a community of faith to sing goes back centuries to the Jewish tradition. They would often spend the whole night singing. And this practice has continued for thousands of years in the Christian tradition and is an essential part of our worship today.

The Bible is full of references to singing. So, this morning, let's look at several of these verses. Let's start with Exodus 15:1-2. The Israelites had just been rescued from the Egyptians when the Lord parted the Red Sea to let them walk safely to the other side and then closed it in on Pharaoh's army.

Read Exodus 15:1-2: "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song: "I will sing to the Lord, for He had triumphed gloriously; horse and rider has been thrown into the sea. The Lord is my

strength and my might, and He has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise Him, my father's God, and I will exalt Him."

We sing to praise God and acknowledge that He is God and is to be worshipped. These are songs like "How Great Thou Art" and "To God Be the Glory" that we sang earlier.

Listen to the call to sing praises to God in Psalm 100. Read Psalm 100.

When the psalmist calls us to join our hearts together with him in singing to the Lord, he is encouraging us to do what Moses and the Israelites had done after crossing the Red Sea in the text from Exodus; what Solomon would do when the temple was dedicated in Jerusalem; what the angels would do when they announced the birth of Jesus Christ to the shepherds on the hillside outside Bethlehem; and what we will do when we all get to heaven. The psalmist calls the people to sing a new song. This new song is not only to be sung in response to what God has done for us or is doing for us, but also in anticipation of what He will do for us in the future. In reality, our lives are songs to God; every day we write a new note or verse, and when we are in tune with God's will, we will truly experience His presence and bring Him great joy.

The psalmist is not alone in challenging us to join in praise to God. We find the Apostle Paul saying the same thing in the New Testament to the church at Ephesus in Ephesians 5:18-19 – "Be filled with the Spirit as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts."

Many people have the impression that being a Christian means that you can't have any fun, or that Christianity is boring. They think you should walk around wearing black and looking gloomy. But that is definitely not the case. Paul is saying that our lives should be lived with songs and hymns to God. Those who make "melody to the Lord" in their hearts can hardly be thought of as missing out on the good times. I don't believe that you can be truly happy if you don't have a song in your heart.

There's an old legend about a man who stumbled upon a great red barn after wandering for days in a dark, overgrown forest. Seeking refuge from the forest's constant howling winds, he gladly entered the barn. When his eyes adjusted to the dark, he discovered to his great astonishment that he was standing in the devil's storehouse of seeds to be sown into human hearts. More curious than fearful, he lit a match and began to explore the seed bins around him. He couldn't help but notice that the containers labeled "discouragement" far outnumbered any other type of seed.

Just as the man had drawn this conclusion, one of the devil's foremost demons arrived to pick up a fresh supply of seed. The man asked him: "Why are there so many seeds of discouragement?" "Because they are so effective and they take root so quickly!" the demon laughed. The man then asked: "Do they grow everywhere?" At this the demon became quiet.

He glared at the man and admitted in disgust: “No. They never seem to thrive in the heart of a grateful person.” Each day we can choose to be thankful in every situation. And one way that we can be sure that the seeds of discouragement do not take root in our souls is to sing, to have a song in our heart. Martin Luther must have known of this legend because he said: “Come, let us sing a psalm and drive away the devil.” It is good to remember that the teakettle, although up to its neck in hot water, continues to sing.

Singing provides a mechanism that communicates to us the meaning and significance of our faith. Singing the words of hymns and reflecting on them can form faith within us. In addition, by singing the hymns together with others, we strengthen the bonds of the community and gain strength to live as disciples in the world around us.

Songs of Christian worship are not individuals singing to themselves or performances; they are another way of drawing the community together in its common faith. Singing contributes greatly to the fellowship; it just feels good when we are singing with someone.

The Apostle Paul continued his encouragement to sing in Colossians 3:16 – “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Some of the most important early doctrines of the church were expressed in Christian songs preserved for us today only in Paul’s letters.

Hymns are meant not only to be a means of worship but also as a means of instruction. If you listen carefully, you can learn a lot, because hymns and songs also teach us and remind us of the biblical truths. How many of us can even remember something from the sermons that we heard during our childhood? Or how many of you can even remember what I preached on last Sunday? But almost without any effort we can remember every word of the hymns we sang decades ago. Hymns such as “Blessed Assurance” deepen our faith in ways that no sermon or Sunday School lesson can.

Singing puts life into worship. And while I love the old traditional hymns, we also need to learn new songs to keep the spirit moving. Every one of us has different tastes in music – some like rock and roll, some like country, and other the oldie goldies. It is the same with church music, some like contemporary, some like gospel songs, and others like the traditional hymns. In a church this size it is difficult to sing all the hymns that everybody like. We need to have a mixture of hymns.

You may have heard the story about the widow who was always complaining to the pastor about the hymns that he selected. So, one Sunday morning the preacher asked her to select the hymns that morning. So, she stood up and said: “I want him, and him and him,” pointing to different men in the congregation.

While our text from Colossians identifies many types of songs, the key point is that the kind of song is not as important as the attitude with which it is sung. Songs should flow out of gratitude and thanksgiving, come from the heart, and be directed in praise to God. The

purpose of music is to stir the soul and to prepare us to hear God's Word and feel the presence of His Spirit. Dwight L. Moody once said: "If we can't wake up the congregation with preaching, then let's stir them up with singing." That's why I like hymns like "Victory in Jesus," "Amazing Grace," and "Here I Am, Lord," because they are sung from the heart. You should hear how you sound when we sing those songs together, the walls start vibrating.

This brings me to a pet peeve of mine. That is when we sing as if we are having a root canal. Anybody remember the old television show *Hee Haw*? They had a segment in the show when a bunch of hillbillies were sitting on a porch with hound dogs all around and singing songs with the attitude of woe, agony is me. Well, I have seen congregations and even some choirs (not ours of course) that sang like that – like they had been baptized with vinegar. When we are praising the Lord, we ought to sing with joy and from the heart; let the love of Christ within you come out boldly and joyfully. You know if there is joy in your heart, you should let your face know it. In addition, music is far more effective when the whole congregation sings rather than when they listen to a performance. Singing reinforces one's beliefs.

One last story – there was an old monk who sang a Christmas song every Christmas Eve for his brothers in the monastery, and for the visitors who would come from the nearby village for the special service. His voice was very ugly, but he loved the Lord and sang from his heart. But one year the music director said: "I'm sorry, Brother Don, we will not need you this Christmas. We have a new monk who has a beautiful voice."

The young monk did sing beautifully, and everyone was happy. But that night an angel came to the superior of the monastery and said: "Why didn't you have a Christmas Eve song?" The superior was very surprised and replied: "We had a beautiful song. Didn't you hear it?" The angel shook his head sadly. "It may have been inspiring to you, but we didn't hear it in heaven. You see the old monk with the raspy voice had a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus and sang from his heart, but the young monk was singing for his own glory, not for that of the Lord."

Somehow, many churchgoers seem to have picked up the idea that "singing in church is only for singers." The truth is that "singing is for believers." The real question is not "do you have a voice" but "do you have a song," do you have a song in your heart, do you have the Lord in your heart? We may not be able to sing with great expertise or carry a tune, but at least all of us can make a joyful noise to the Lord.

We can rejoice that our God is the God who puts a song in our heart. Singing to the heart like medicine is to the body. In singing we express our love, devotion, joy, thanksgiving, and praise to God. In the hymn "His Eye Is on the Sparrow," it says that we sing because we are happy; we sing because God loves us; we sing because of what Jesus Christ did for us. If Christ is in your heart, then let the world know it by singing with all of your heart! Amen