

EASTER FIVE

May 3, 2015

1 John 3:1-7

"How Can I Keep from Singing?"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

On this Sunday when we're celebrating the music ministry of First Lutheran church, and five musicians who have served here for over 100 years combined, it might interest you to note, that **the words "music", "sing", and "song" occur over 270 times** in the Bible!

Clearly, music is an important part of the Christian tradition. Our first lesson today is one of many places in the Psalms where music is held up as a wonderful way to praise God and give thanks to Him for all his blessings:

Psalm 95:1-7

"1 O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

2 Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! 3 For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Martin Luther was a huge fan of music, and a lover of hymns and music in the liturgy. Let me share some of his thoughts about music:

*"God has made our hearts and spirits happy through his dear Son, whom He has delivered up that we might be redeemed.... He who believes this **cannot help but be happy**; he must cheerfully sing and talk about this, that others might hear it and come to Christ.*

Or: *"My heart overflows with fondness for music, which has refreshed me so often and freed me from great burdens.*

Martin Luther was, to put it much too mildly, a music lover. *"Next to the Word of God," he said, "the noble art of music is **the greatest treasure in the world!** The riches of music are so excellent and so precious that words fail me whenever I attempt to discuss and describe them."*

I especially love these comments on the beauty of harmony. I guess this could be a good quote to share with every choir at the beginning of the year:

"Music, this precious gift, has been bestowed on humans alone to remind us that we are created to praise and magnify the Lord. But 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, springing round about, marvelously gracing the simple part, like a folk dance in heaven.... He who does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod!"

Luther thought of music as a truly wonderful and powerful gift of God's creative hand. In a preface to a collection of hymns published in 1538 Luther wrote:

“I most heartily desire that music, that divine and precious gift, be praised and extolled before all people. ...Experience proves that, next to the Word of God, only music deserves to be seen as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart. ...A greater praise than this we cannot imagine.

Of course, I totally agree with Luther on the value and power of music. It's one reason I always insist that our acolytes open their hymnals when we sing, and, even if they **can't or, more likely, don't want to sing**, I tell them to mouth the words, because they are worship leaders, and help set the tone for others in the congregation.

The same is true of parents. **Nothing warms my heart more** than seeing a mom or a dad **holding the hymnal open for their young child and pointing to the words of the hymn.**

Children learn from example, and this teaches them that **singing hymns is one way we show our thanks and praise to God** for all His marvelous gifts to us.

Over the years I've come to the conclusion that **hymn-writers are often better preachers than I am**, and so I sometimes urge the congregation to pay attention to the words of our hymns.

Just to prove my point, for the rest of my sermon I'll simply share the words to two of today's hymns, knowing that they will convey a message from God to each of you, if only your hearts are open.

When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride, it is as though the whole creation cried: Alleluia!

How oft, in making music, we have found a new dimension in the world of sound, as worship moved us to a more profound Alleluia!

So has the church, in liturgy and song, in faith and love, through centuries of wrong, borne witness to the truth in ev'ry tongue: Alleluia!

Let ev'ry instrument be tuned for praise; let all rejoice who have a voice to raise; and may God give us faith to sing always: Alleluia!

And now hear the words of our Hymn of the Day:

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation, I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.

Refrain

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?

*What though my joys and comforts die? The Lord my Savior liveth. What though the darkness gather round? **Songs in the night he giveth.***

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing! All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

My fervent prayer for each of you today is that the Holy Spirit would speak to your heart through the words of our anthems, liturgy and hymns, and that the Lord, our savior, would give you “*songs in the night,*” when “*darkness gather’s round.*” Amen.