

2018 05 06 – Sing a New Song

Psalm 98

When I meet with a family before a funeral we begin by confirming the date, time and place of the funeral and then usually the next thing we do is talk about music. We discuss the music that will be playing as people gather, the song that will be heard as the family processes in, the hymns that will be sung by the congregation and the piece that will be performed as the family leaves. We think about the type of music that the deceased enjoyed, we talk about songs that have special meaning to the family. We take a lot of time choosing the songs and the hymns because the music that is heard at a funeral frames the liturgy and sets the tone for the service.

Often, during this conversation, a favourite hymn or song is revealed. Most of us have particular hymns or popular songs that we prefer. Some of us even have one piece of music that is our favourite. I'd like you to think about a song (popular or sacred) that has a special meaning for you. Maybe it's one that you'd like played at your funeral. Maybe it's just one that you really like. What is it? Some of you may have a list, but I just want one. *(leave time for answers, check the choir – mostly hymns or secular? sad or happy?)*

Now that you have a song in mind, I want you to think back. When did you first hear the song? How old were you? What was happening in your life at that time? Was it connected to a particular stage or event in your past? Would

someone like to share their song and a brief explanation of what makes it special? *(leave time for 2 or 3 stories)* One of my favourite hymns is “Here I Am Lord.” It’s a favourite for me because there was a time in my life when I couldn’t sing that hymn without bursting into tears. It was during the time that I was discerning my call to ministry. And now hearing that hymn is always an affirmation of that choice. For many of us, our favourite songs come from our teenage years: an incredible time of change and development in our lives, a time when our emotions were deep and out of control. For others, their favourite song may be connected to an important relationship, a time of great joy or even a time of great pain.

Music is an important part of many of the milestones in our lives: baptisms, graduations, weddings, and funerals. Lots of people spend their whole day with music playing in the background. Others turn their radio, stereo, iPod or smartphone on as soon as they have the opportunity. Music is an important part of our lives.

But today we are not just talking about listening to music. Today’s scripture reading begins with the words: “Sing to God a New Song.” In Psalm 98 we are being called not just to listen to music, but also to sing. The ancient Hebrew people sang their psalms. They sang their laments, they sang their doctrine, and they sang their celebrations. Every culture in the world includes some form of singing in their tradition and our western culture is no exception. In our United Church of Canada, singing has always been and remains an important part of our worship service.

So what is it about singing? Why do we sing every Sunday? Well worship itself is about celebrating the presence of the sacred in our lives. Psalm 98 says, “Sing to God a new song for God has done marvellous things.” It is interesting to note that biblical scholars don’t necessarily agree about what those marvellous things were. They could be a specific victory in war, or the Israelite’s deliverance from Egypt or their return from exile in Babylon or, very possibly, the gift of life itself. It could be the celebration of the healing power of unconditional love, or the promise of peace and justice for all creation. No matter what the celebration the Israelites were called and we are called to “make a joyful noise to God.” When we sing we are giving thanks and praise, we are connecting with the sacred, not just with our hearts and with our minds but also with our bodies and our souls.

When we sing, we are connecting not only with Holy Mystery, but also with each other. On April 21st, there was a musical event that took place at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland. It was organized by Fogo Island Arts and was called *Singing the Skillful Community*. While describing this opportunity to sing in a mass choir, the organizers said,

The communal activity of singing establishes connections among different people, uniting independent voices under a common purpose and creating a sense of belonging. Singing can be a political act, a choice to overcome diversity in pursuit of a greater, harmonious whole. The more we use singing to bring us together—literally and figuratively—the more potential there is for increased empathy, social connection, and cooperation.

<https://fogoislandarts.ca/news/dialogues/fogo-island-dialogues-singing-public/>

Every time we sing on Sunday morning, we are our building and strengthening our own faith community. In the Psalm 98, the writer extends that idea of community to “all the ends of the earth” and even invites the rivers, the seas and the hills to join in the celebration.

When ministers get together, we often talk about “preaching to the choir” and today I think I’ve taken that concept to whole new level. I should probably turn to the choir and ask them, “So what is it about singing?” I’m sure they would tell me all about the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual benefits of singing in a choir. Singing can actually heal us. The deep, regular breathing that is required for singing has many of the same benefits as yoga, or meditation. One Catholic composer wrote, ““Music has a transformative power. It gets into the crevices of the human soul and brings about a thirst for transformation.”

<http://sites.nd.edu/oblation/2012/09/18/midwife-of-faith-the-soul-transforming-power-of-music/>

And finally the hymns and the songs that we sing reflect our vision of the world. They tell us about our understanding of God and of each other. When we sing it is both the music and the words that speak to us. I know it can be awkward to introduce new music in our worship space - sometimes we stumble over the tune, or the rhythm or the words. It’s always easier to sing our old favourites, the hymns that we know by heart. But singing a new song reflects our growth not just in the type of music that we appreciate but also in our relationship with God and with the world. So let us all sing a new song. Let us make a joyful noise to God, all the earth.