

## “Realizing Unity in Song”

Based on Eph. 5:15-20

First delivered Aug. 19, 2018

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We are continuing a series of messages taken from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. He is writing to a church that was experiencing strain, and the potential to fracture. This letter is intended to remind the church of what they have received from God. It is a reminder of who they are in Christ. We began this series by focusing on Paul’s teaching to build up the body of Christ in love. Each of us has been gifted by the Spirit for the purpose of building each other up so that we can do good in the world for God’s glory. Last week we looked at some specific instructions Paul gave that helps us live a life of love. We have been called to a specific way of life, which is the way of love. Because God has brought us together, we ought to love each other. So far in this series we have seen one of Paul’s primary emphases, which is unity. God is the source of our unity. The unity we have has been given to us by God who has brought us together. In spite of what threatens to break our unity as the body of Christ, there still remains one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God of all. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are bound together by the Spirit of God. Our challenge is to not only acknowledge it, but be grateful for it and do everything we can to maintain that unity that has been given to us by God.

Today’s passage is also about unity even though the term is not used in the passage. It calls us to do a couple things that realize the unity we have in Christ. The two things that Paul encourages us to do are to sing together and to give thanks to God in every situation. So let’s take a look at these two activities that we do together as the body of Christ, particularly when we gather together on Sunday morning.

First, let’s talk about singing. Paul invites us to have the Holy Spirit fill us as we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs among ourselves. As United Methodists, that’s right down our alley! The Wesleyan tradition of which we are a part has always had an emphasis on the singing of hymns. Hymn singing has been and remains a vital

tool, not just to express our hearts to God but also to teach what we believe. If you wanted to study the theology of John and Charles Wesley, you go to John's sermons and letters and you go to Charles' hymns. He literally wrote thousands of hymns. Over six hundred hymns on Holy Communion alone.

Wesley's hymns are a great tool to teach theology, without the use of technical words but with the rich language of poetry. But hymn singing is also a powerful group experience. It is something our tradition has always treasured. Any of us who have gone to a hymn sing know what I mean. And when you get a couple thousand Methodists together at Annual Conference to sing hymns, spirituals, contemporary worship music, it uplifts the soul.

Group singing is a necessary expression of unity. Each person participates with their own unique vocal sound. Some voices are deep, some high, some in between. Some are soft and some are strong. Some are right on pitch and others are a little off. And some aren't even in the ballpark. But it's ok because in the act of group singing, especially when the song is well known and loved, it all comes together. The other great thing about group singing is that there is always room for one more voice. You never have too many singers. The singing circle can always be opened wider. In fact, the more people who sing, the easier it is for those who are less confident in their singing to join in. Their uncertain voices blend in with the stronger voices around them. And one more thing about group singing as opposed to singing solos or smaller groups: there is a lot of grace. You can flub up the words, take a breath whenever you want, stop singing for a bit, it doesn't matter because the whole group is carrying the song. Truly, group singing is a unifying experience. The Spirit does fill our hearts and fill the space when a group of people are singing together.

Think of the experiences you have had of group singing aside from church on Sunday morning. Circled around the campfire. Singing Happy Birthday to a friend. Participation in a mass choir. Some of the experiences I have had will always stick with me. I remember attending a Promise Keepers convention in Dallas, Texas back in the 1990s. Thousands of men were gathered at Dallas Stadium for worship and to

hear speakers who challenged us to live lives that honored God and cared for our families and communities. I will never forget the experience of joining over 6,000 other men singing with all our might. We would have lifted the roof if the stadium had one! I will also never forget seeing the Indigo Girls in the early 2000s over at the Newport. The place was packed. And the 400 or so of us gathered there knew all their songs. It became one big group singalong and it was so cool. It was the greatest bonding experience I've ever had at a concert. The unity and good feeling in that space was palpable. What memories come to your mind of those experiences of group singing in which your heart was filled as you felt that spirit of unity? Paul tells us not to get drunk on wine but instead to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Wine can cheer your heart, but music does a much better job, especially group singing.

Music does have the power to help us make real the unity that we have and it can lift us up, fill our hearts and souls with the Spirit. Music can also help us give thanks to God at all times for everything. Now this is one of those teachings of Paul's that doesn't look to be taken literally. How do we literally thank God at all times for everything? There are some things that we go through in which there is nothing to be thankful for. I am thinking of health crises, the loss of someone too soon, a natural disaster, a freak accident, a vicious assault. I could go on and on. Come to think of it, there are a lot of experiences that we can't thank God for. So what is Paul talking about?

Well, I think we all agree that there are things that happen which we can't give God thanks for. But maybe that's not what Paul is asking us to do. Maybe what he means to say that we are to thank *God* in every situation. It's not about thanking God *for* the situation but to thank God *in* the situation. Now this makes more sense to me. In any situation, even difficult ones, we can, by the help of the Holy Spirit, give thanks to God.

But what are we thanking God for? We can thank God for a lot of things. We can be thankful that God is with us in the situation. We can be thankful that God has given us brothers and sisters in Christ who will support us, encourage us, help us through. We can thank God for grace. We can thank God for love. We can be thankful that God will never, ever abandon us.

This being thankful to God in hard situations is not being Pollyanna. It's not about having a grin on your face or being sentimental or any of that. Some things happen that are just plain ugly. There are times when grief and lament are necessary. What I am saying is that in some difficult situations, giving thanks to God is an act of resistance. It is resistance to despair. It is resistance to hopelessness. It is to affirm that God's power is greater than anything that would stand against it.

There's this song by Chris Tomlin which has a lyric that expresses what I'm trying to say. It goes: Every blessing You pour out I'll turn back to praise; and when the darkness closes in Lord, still I will say blessed be the name of the Lord, blessed be Your name. Blessed be the name of the Lord, blessed be Your glorious name.

And this is where music comes in. Music helps us give thanks to God, especially when facing difficult times when there's not a lot to be thankful for. I have found that music lifts my soul when I am feeling down, frustrated, or anxious. Music puts me in a different frame of mind where I can see through the murkiness of whatever is going on and be able to affirm that I am still loved, that God is still with me, that I have a family and friends that love me and are there for me, that I am a part of the body of Christ, that I am not alone. And I can be thankful for all this.

And this gets me to Aretha Franklin, who passed away a few days ago. A lot has been written and said since her passing about the difficult life she experienced. She had a rough childhood. She became a mother at a young age. Being a black woman in the music business and to not only survive but to thrive as she did brought with it indignities, betrayals, stuff that you and I can't even imagine. In fact that's what someone who was very close to her for many years said about her life when he was being interviewed. He said that Aretha went through some stuff that he didn't even want to know about.

But that was the thing about her music. Someone said you can sense her pain through her music. It was this black man who was saying that the collective pain of being black in America was something that infused her music but in a way that gave you strength, fortitude, even a little joy. It wasn't just her voice, but her very presence, that filled up the space she was in. She refused to be held back from being herself. Her

music was the way she expressed the power of the Holy Spirit, I would say. And the Spirit that filled her blessed so many people, filling their hearts and lifting them up.

So here is a homework assignment for you. Go on YouTube and search Aretha Franklin Amazing Grace. Listen to her rendition of that hymn or go ahead and listen to the whole album. I thought about playing the song for you but it's too long. So check it out for yourself. The way Aretha sings that well-loved hymn is so powerful. Not only does she sing in a way that expresses her pain and her hope, but she takes the congregation with her, a congregation gathered together in California in 1972, a time of great unrest and hardship throughout the nation. I think it was the hardness of the times that provided the context for Aretha Franklin to take that pain and redeem it through the music. And that congregation was lifted up with gratitude and thanksgiving, not just to Aretha, but to God. Listening to the record and imagining yourself there, you can't help but have your soul stirred. That's why she is the queen of soul. She demonstrates what Paul was saying when he told the church not to get drunk on wine but to be filled with the Spirit, as we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, making melody in our hearts, and giving thanks to God at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.