

Devotions – October 20-26, 2019

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Sunday October 20, 2019

Bible Verse: Ephesians 5:19

“as you sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There is a radio station in our area that specializes in playing Golden Oldies. The era that they choose their songs from fits quite nicely into my life experience because most every choice is one I know and can relate to. Like so many other things in life relevance depends on your perspective. Had I been born 20 or 30 years later I would have a far different feel about the music played. Conversely, had it been 20 or 30 years before the same would be true. In either case it would be difficult to relate. As Doctors Freud and Spock taught us so many years ago, we are the sum total of our conscious experiences. The musical experience of our church life can be one of those powerful shaping influences.

Church is a form of community; it brings people together with the common purpose of worship. Christ told us that wherever two or more gather to do so He is with us. As a means of expressing the love of the Lord singing is an important aspect of a worship experience. It brings the people of the congregation closely together by the communal effort of singing to the glory of God. It is unlikely that most people engage in any form of group singing outside of church. I’ve always thought that singing together is as important as confessing, praying and reciting the liturgy. Though it doesn’t rise to the level of a sacrament it is a sacred thing.

My home church is a singing congregation. Whenever visitors are in attendance a common comment from them is how pleased they were with the musical parts of the service. Often we don’t sing as many “Golden Oldies” as I like, but we cover a wide range of hymns to please most folks. A strong choir is an important part of our tradition as well. As I reflect on the words of Paul in the Ephesians citation above our congregation meets his entreaty to “give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Prayer: *May we always sing praises to the Lord our God. Never let us lose our willingness to sing to the glory of the Lord. Give strength to our voices and understanding to our minds as we sing and make melody to the Lord in our hearts. Amen.*



Monday October 21, 2019

Bible Verse: Colossians 3:16

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.”

As mentioned in earlier devotions, often hymns will get labeled as pertaining to one purpose or another. A hymn may become a funeral, baptismal, confirmation, seasonal or holiday piece of music. The conviction may become so strong that only on those “special” occasions can they be used.

Frequently these labels are quite a bit off the mark. One such hymn is *We Gather Together*. Thanksgiving, the holiday, only comes once a year and that seems to be about the only time this venerated hymn might be used. If only one old familiar tune is chosen, then it probably will lose out to *Come Ye Thankful People Come*. If neither is chosen, we’ll most likely have to wait another year to possibly sing one or the other since both have become Thanksgiving songs.

We Gather Together was not written to commemorate the holiday. It actually has no known author for its lyrics and the music is of Dutch origin. One source says that the tune was written about 1600 and is a Dutch patriotic song celebrating the Netherlands being freed from Spanish rule. The verses have a political element to them transcending secular nations and governments. God is referred to as our hope to conquer evil and the devil and for that he deserves thanks from the people of God, for he “forgets not His own.”

So in a sense it is very much a thanksgiving song just not one obviously tied to the American holiday.

Prayer: *Lord, let us ever be mindful of our need to thank you for the many blessings you provide us. Our thanks need not be tied to a special day but rather should be included in our prayers every day to recognize that each day of life is a gift from you. Amen.*



Tuesday October 22, 2019

Bible Verse: Genesis 28:11-12

“So he came to a certain place and stayed there all night, because the sun had set. And he took one of the stones of that place and he put it at his head, and he lay down in that place to sleep. Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven, and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.”

Years ago there was a debate among a number of historians as to whether the hymn being played as the *Titanic* sank was *Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past* or *Nearer My God to Thee*. If we credit James Cameron, producer of the most recent epic about the event, with doing quality research for his movie then we will vote for the latter. Whichever it was the image is the same one. Facing

extreme crisis and life-threatening circumstance or even worse, certain death, people turn to God. It's said that there are no atheists in a foxhole. Whatever the situation, it seems when faced with dire straits God and his promise of salvation become the focal point of attention. That concept can lead to a deep philosophical or theological debate that I won't venture into here.

Returning to the decks of the *Titanic*, let's accept Cameron's interpretation of history and hear the strains of *Nearer My God to Thee*. We can't begin to imagine the sheer terror felt by the many passengers who realized there was no hope for them. Nor will we ever know if any of them, once resigned to their fate, felt consoled by hearing this familiar old hymn. The primary point is that hymns invoke an image or reminder of God and our salvation purchased by Christ's death on the cross. The music would remind people of that promise and the hope for eternal life. Surely that must have consoled some of the doomed on those decks.

The *R.M.S. Titanic* was a British ship owned by the White Star Line. *Nearer My God to Thee* is a British hymn old enough in 1912 to have been sung by many generations. It was written in 1841 by the English poet and Unitarian hymn writer Sarah Flower Adams with the music coupled to it written by Lowell Mason in 1856. By 1912 the hymn had become a well-regarded standard.

Though it is most often linked with the *Titanic* tragedy the hymn has been part of a long list of historic situations. President William McKinley was assassinated and died in September 1901. It's said that his dying words were the first lines of the hymn. At 3:30 on the afternoon of September 14 after 5 minutes of silence across the nation, bands throughout the country played the hymn which was McKinley's favorite. It was also played as his funeral procession moved down Pennsylvania Avenue and as well at the end of his service. Though there are many other tales of its place in history, the one I found most interesting was that the Confederate Army band played it as the survivors of the ill-fated Pickett's Charge returned during the Battle of Gettysburg.

I find it really interesting that a common element in all of these stories of strife and loss is people turning to this honored hymn to assuage their grief and remind themselves of God's love. The power of such music is truly marvelous.

Prayer: *Lord, we pray that we shall always be able to hear music that reminds us of the power of your love for your children. Use that music to calm our souls in times of stress, grief and loss. Amen*



Wednesday October 23, 2019

Bible Verse: Psalm 47:5-7

“God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm.”

It is always a pleasant surprise when a hymn is chosen that I might not be familiar with, or one I had somewhat forgotten, only to find a very familiar tune used as the music. An example would be *O Christ the Same* #778 in *With One Voice*. The tune is far better known as *Danny Boy*. The tune is referenced as *Londonderry Air* and is originally an old anonymously written Irish folk tune. It has become one of the most recognizable tunes throughout the world. The hymn as we now use it in *With One Voice* was written by a Bishop of the Church of England, Timothy Dudley-Smith. He was a highly regarded hymn writer and was awarded the Order of the British Empire for “services to hymnody.”

There are a number of other hymns in our hymnals that share this same relationship of lyrics written coupled with familiar tunes. *What Child is This?* is clearly another good example using the old English ballad *Greensleeves*. *Barbara Allen* is a well-known ballad from English history, and it provides the tune for *My Lord of Light* and *Accept, O Lord, the Gifts We Bring* hymns included in both the *ELW* and *With One Voice*.

Classical composers are also represented in this same vein of linking some of their most familiar works with the words penned by a hymn writer. Probably the most well-known of this blending is *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee* joining the words of Henry van Dyke to the glorious music of Ludwig van Beethoven’s final movement of his 9th Symphony. Almost as familiar is *Thine Is the Glory* with lyrics written by a Swiss, Edmond Budry, set to the music of George Frideric Handel’s third part of his oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus*. Though I am certain there are many more, most of which I’m probably unaware, one last example comes to mind. Franz Joseph Haydn composed what has become one of the most recognized melodies as part of his *String Quartet* #62 titled *Emperor*. In the *ELW* it is #823 titled *Praise the Lord! O Heavens* but in my memory the tune was the one to which we sang *Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken*. The same tune is also used as the music for the national anthem of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Typically the words in many, if not most, hymns were written earlier than the music. Later a composer would write the music to marry to the words of the hymn’s author. In the examples above the opposite seemed to be the case where words were penned to fit a well-known tune that had gained popularity over the years.

We have been the beneficiaries of these efforts as the combinations of words and music have been passed on to us to help us praise the Lord in beautiful music.

Prayer: *Lord, how much richer our lives and worship have been made by the creative talents that have come together to provide the music that glorifies you. May we ever be blessed to enjoy it. Amen.*



Thursday October 24, 2019

Bible Verse: Psalm 71:20-21

“You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again. You will increase my honor and comfort me once again.”

At various times in my religious experience I have come across situations where I have felt somewhat uncomfortable by virtue of what was asked of me. Generally these would be situations where I was being asked to join in on an activity that involved interactivity with others. Discomfort came with the expectation that I would have to reveal my personal thoughts on subjects I was uncertain of or that there were elements of the experience that were new and unfamiliar. As I have mentioned in the past, I don't accept change real easily and some of the things that the Church now deals with I struggle with.

Some years ago, I was involved in a church function that included some kind of a group activity which had a segment that had us singing and then discussing our thoughts about the dancing imagery of the hymn *Lord of the Dance*. I can recall my initial reaction of almost feeling affronted by this religious pop treatment of a classic Shaker tune, *'Tis the Gift to be Simple* or as it is more commonly called *Simple Gifts*. Aaron Copeland had treated it with respect by weaving it into his *Appalachian Spring* orchestral suite and now it was being used as the tune for this newfangled hymn. It seemed almost irreverent.

As we talked my critical thoughts turned inward, in part because my table mates loved the song. They liked the imagery of the dancing Christ, the message of the lyrics, and they thought the music was great. I wondered how I could be so out of step with their attitudes. I began to realize that I ought to re-examine my attitude as to why I was uncomfortable. It didn't take long to realize that I disliked my sense of comfort being abused by not only this “treatment” of this classic old tune but by the ready acceptance and preference of the others in our group. Their attitude was one of embracing and finding value in change and I was stodgy and resistive, out of step with the times.

Though *Lord of the Dance* has not made it into either of our two most commonly used hymnals it does pop up as sheet music from time to time. It is a good singable hymn and one that I now welcome. I believe that this story is a metaphor for the Church. We must adapt and relate appropriately to a changing world. Make certain we keep our primary values intact but welcome and shape change so we can remain contemporary.

Prayer: *We must always remember that we are part of the world we live in and rather than seeking refuge from it in the sanctuary of the Church our need is to bring the Church to the world. Tell the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world that needs it now as it always has. That is the Great Commission. Amen*



Friday October 25, 2019

Bible Verse: Psalm 24:1-3

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.”

The creation story establishes the very close relationship God has with the Earth. The first chapter of Genesis depicts God’s action of creation, his granting dominion over the Earth to humankind. So it has been for all of human history. Our stewardship has been fine at times and horrible at others. Currently there is probably no greater concern in the world than the future of the planet. While there are naysayers, most people recognize threatening change occurring increasingly as each year passes.

Hymn writers have seemingly recognized the obligation humans have for tending to our charge of appreciating and caring for our world. The *ELW* is sectioned by categories that hymns most logically fit into. One section is labeled Stewardship and within the selected hymns you will find a good number of them dealing with the wonders of God’s creation and our relationship to it. Most often the theme is one of praise for the myriad benefits we have been given; majestic mountains, bountiful fields, teeming oceans, glorious sunshine, beautiful flowers, etc. *For the Beauty of the Earth* #839 and *How Marvelous God’s Greatness* #830 are only two of many hymns that recount the theme of our ceaseless wonder and our need to be ever mindful of the great gifts God has given us. In them and many similar hymns there is also the implication that we are to protect and care for these same gifts.

The ELCA has taken a stance on things and, basically, has said, we all have the responsibility to care for God’s world and should work cooperatively to bring about the necessary changes in the way we live to correct things. To some ears that might seem like a simple platitude, but, at the very least, we have our social concerns on record. Every Sunday one of our intercessory prayers speaks to the awareness of our need for God’s help in doing our part in caring for his Kingdom. Of course, the Church is us and the clear message is that if there needs to be things done it is up to each of us.

Prayer: *Lord help us help ourselves as we consider how best to care for your world. Give us open eyes, ears and minds to truly understand how fragile the Earth is and what has to be done to protect it. Amen.*



Saturday October 26, 2019

Bible Verse: Psalm 107:28-31

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he brought them out from their distress; he made the storms be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed. Then they were glad because they had quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.”

There was a time in the history of American hymns that there was a strong flavor of patriotism woven into the music. The contrast today is quite extreme with very few hymns evoking any mention of nation, flag, war or love of country. This is largely a reflection of the times and changing attitudes in society, and most assuredly in the church. Jesus Christ is a gentler, warmer and loving Lord than the warrior King of some of those old hymns. In the memory of some older folks they can remember singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*, *Am I a Soldier of the Cross*, *Stand Up*, *Stand Up for Jesus* or *The Son of God Goes Forth to War*. There are a good number of others that could be recounted but perhaps more telling is that our current hymnal does not include *God of Our Fathers*, which is considered our national hymn.

A few years ago, in conversation with a church leader I was pointing out something I found interesting: the ELW includes the Canadian national anthem but not our own in the slim section at the back of the hymnal labeled National Songs. She responded by saying that *O Canada* includes a reference to God and our anthem does not. Just out of curiosity I checked other stanzas and found a clear reference to God in stanza 3 of *The Star Spangled Banner*. But I got her point; whoever sings beyond the first?

I was personally pleased to realize that the expunging of these type of hymns stopped short of eliminating the Navy Hymn, *Eternal Father*, *Strong to Save*. This is a British hymn written by William Whiting an Anglican cleric, in 1860 and was adopted by the Royal Navy first and then other nation's navies including the United States. Whiting's inspiration came from Psalm 107, cited above, as a reflection of God's concern for those who must travel on the seas. He had nearly lost his life at 35 when he was on a ship in a violent storm. He survived and thanked God for calming the raging seas and allowing him to live.

As I've said before, I don't accept change easily and while I agree that we must change to adapt to an evolving world I regret some of the old being discarded to make way for the new. Political correctness is important in these days of hyper-sensitivity, nationally and personally. The Church must remain relevant to allow the Good News to reach this new world. We must understand that, but such change doesn't come without some regrets. However, we were imbued with the ability to adjust to face the future with conviction and hope. Thanks be to God!

Prayer: *Lord, continue to challenge us to adapt to the changes in your world. In fact, make us agents of change to your glory. Amen.*

