

The Good News of Music

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Sunshine Cathedral Luke 7.31-35

November 9th, 2008 – Dedication of our Organ Sunday

My great-aunt Gladys was peeling potatoes one day, when my great-uncle Arthur started playing his harmonica in the kitchen. Well, the harmonica is not the most melodious of instruments anyway, but Uncle Arthur was particularly bad at playing it. Finally, when she could take it no more, Aunt Gladys shouted at my Uncle Arthur, “Arthur, I wish you’d throw that harmonica out and take up the banjo!” Arthur, feeling strangely encouraged, said, “Why Gladys, I didn’t know you enjoyed banjo music.” She said, “I don’t, but you can’t beat someone senseless with a harmonica.”

St. Paul wrote, “Whatever is true...honorable...just, whatever is pure...lovely...gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4.8).

That is exactly what we are doing here today. This morning we hear and celebrate and dedicate our amazing organ. Now why exactly is it important that we celebrate and dedicate an instrument?

There are three reasons, and I am happy to share those with you now.

The first reason we celebrate and dedicate this organ is because of its progressive function in the life of our shared community.

In the story of the Nativity, Luke presents shepherds in the field tending their flocks at night. Shepherds...think of Brokeback Mountain . Two guys, living outdoors, tending animals, eating over a camp fire, performing acts of hygiene with very little water. One wouldn’t want a shepherd to come right off the job to a dinner party. They were not considered high on the social stratification pyramid. In fact, because they worked hard and for not much money, and because they were often sun scorched and not quite fresh, some people looked down on shepherds. They were considered dangerous. Those smelly people who live outside and work with animals might snatch someone’s purse or seek to do one harm. They would at very least get too close and make one feel uncomfortable.

And yet, shepherds are the people whom angels visit. Shepherds, just as they were, shunned and discriminated against and judged harshly by “polite” society...Shepherds are given Good News of a homeless baby, born to an unwed mother, lying in a feeding trough in a barn. God comes to the least and the lowly...not only to them, but as one of them! The good news comes to those who need it most...the good news that in God’s economy, no one is left out. And that good news is delivered by angel voices; in fact, the angels form a choir and break out into song, singing “Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace, goodwill toward ALL people.”

Music communicates good news. Music becomes the voices of angels speaking directly to our hearts. Music excludes no one; and as the rich tones of our organ vibrate through this room, we each feel the energy, we each are included in its magic, we each share the experience of the harmonies. The organ produces a sound that even the hearing impaired can feel, it fills the room with the energy of hope and inclusion and celebration...it communicates the progressive good news of God’s All-inclusive and unconditional Love. The energy of the organ, mimicking the energy of the spirit, leaves no one out.

The second reason we celebrate and dedicate this organ today is because of its’ positive function in the life of our shared community.

Returning to the wisdom of the Apostle Paul, we read, “The Spirit comes to the aid of our weaknesses; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit herself intercedes with

inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8.26). The spirit of life which expresses through and as each one of us offers a very positive gift to us. Words are so limiting sometimes; that’s why arguing about God is so unproductive. No words could ever adequately express the No-Thing that enfolds and fills Every-thing. Our words point to Divine Reality, but they can never contain, limit, or even adequately express the experience we call “God.” Victor Hugo said, “Music expresses what cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent.”

How many times have we felt something so powerful, but when we tried to give words to the experience, we had to admit that the words failed us. Even when we find words, they seem so inadequate compared to the experience they are trying to communicate.

How many times have we had pain that only a hug could ease, or fear that only a smile could lighten, or loneliness that only a loving presence could remove? How many times have we had a longing that only a tear could express, or an emptiness that only the sound of compassion could fill? Our society is biased toward verbal intelligence, and yet there are those deep places and profound moments in life where words simply will not do. We don’t know what to say, because there is nothing to say. As my Gladys once told me, “some things are better felt than told.”

And here, in our own worship space, we have instruments, including the organ. Instruments are not limited by words. Instruments can give expression to our longings, our hopes, our joys, our disappointments, our grief, our courage, our inward light. Music can give voice to the divine without limiting the Unlimited with the smallness of words. What a positive gift it is to have a means for the spirit to musically groan and hum and vibrate and moan and whisper all of our feelings and needs. When words fail, we still have something that doesn’t need words, and that divine Something will often be heard in the sounds of instrumental music.

The third reason we celebrate and dedicate this organ today is because of its’ practical function in the life of our community. In the gospel reading this morning, Jesus points out that when people feel joy, they play music and they dance. When they feel sad, or when they are grieving, they sing and they cry. Music helps us express our feelings, and embrace not only our own joys and sorrows, but it helps us remember that other people have reasons to celebrate and reasons to mourn. Music helps us be our most authentic selves, and it helps us connect with others in their moments of profound gladness and regret.

When John the Baptizer presented himself in a serious, sober manner, people called him odd. They said he was demon possessed...a common diagnosis in antiquity for whatever people feared or couldn’t understand. But Jesus enjoyed table fellowship with all kinds of people, and his willingness to socialize with so-called sinners and undesirables, his attending weddings and dinner parties also annoyed people. They called him a drunk and a glutton and a friend of the wrong sorts of people.

But Jesus says Wisdom is vindicated by all her children...that is, those who sing sad songs, like John; and those who wine and dine and dance, like Jesus...are all part of God’s plan. Music calls us into the broad range of human emotion, expression, and experience. It’s all useful, all needed. Some will criticize when the music is slow; others will criticize when the music is upbeat, but the varieties of music reflect the varieties of experience and needs and emotions, all of which are part of our wholeness, which is to say, our holiness.

We tend to take music for granted, but the truth is, music is a wonderful gift to our lives. Music is progressive as it resonates within us, and therefore affirms us. Music is positive, as it gives substance to those feelings and needs and fondest hopes that are just too profound for mere words. And music is practical, as it connects us with our authentic selves, and with the rest of the universe, reminding us that we all one with all life and with the source of life.

Music, therefore, is one of the many ways that the Good News is proclaimed. And if music is one of the expressions of the Gospel, the organ is one of the ministers of the gospel. We are here

today to embrace the power of the gospel in our own lives, and to bless and dedicate one of the ministers of the musical gospel...the organ. This is the Good News. Amen.

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The song of God's heart includes me.
The song of God's love blesses me.
The song of God's goodness lifts me up.
The song of abundant life is my song now.
Thanks be to God!
Amen.

"May we find strength in things which cannot fail, in a love which faces every fact, in a sense of community which leaves no human being out, and in ideals which are close to Life and lead us on and on." Amen.