

Musical Worship: Ministry towards Unity for Voices and the Body of Christ.

A sermon prepared for Sunnybrook United Church, Red Deer Alberta (September, 2014) under the leadership of MUSIC UNITED, an association of musicians in the United Church

➤ Readings for the day: Selections from Chronicles I/II; Matthew 18: 15-22.

I have a friend who is deeply invested in Ancestry.com. Locating the names and addresses of her grandparents, great-grandparents and generations beyond that is an ongoing pre-occupation. She recently discovered that her great-great grandfather had been buried in Nelsonville, Ohio, following his service in the American Civil War in the 1860's; on the other side of the family she discovered that her father's ancestors made their home in a village (population 50) in southwest Germany in the 1500's. But up until one year ago, she knew nothing of this. Her family have never been story-tellers. They have simply resorted to sharing the details of their current lives, not of the distant past. So it is with many of our families. When we are scattered across this great land, with parents in Halifax and children in Whitehorse, stories of family identity often get lost in the pressure of one annual visit, or weekly emails.

We, as Christians, have a family story too. The Christian community is mandated to “go to the world” with our story of a Triune God, who is the Source of all that is; whose love was so great that Jesus found a home among us, and is alive forever; that we are able to be in relationship not only with the Holy One but with each other through the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the many ways we communicate and reinforce our commitment to this story of identity is by reading about our Christian ancestors from the First Testament and the Second Testament; another way is by singing parts of that story.

A hymn from 1866 illustrates this point: *I love to tell the story of unseen things above; of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love. . .*

A large percentage of congregations in the United Church choose to follow the *Revised Common Lectionary* at least part of the year. Created in the early nineties, it is an excellent tool for the discipline of lifting up biblical teachings, because, over a period of three years, it provides lists of verses covering 71% of the bible for our consideration.

It is also an excellent resource for worship planning, especially for music planning, because the stories to be shared are laid out in a predictable sequence, and music leaders and preachers can plan and rehearse relevant items well in advance.

Today your leadership team has exercised what I call one of the genius elements in the United Church: from Matthew 18, we called up part of the lectionary for the Gospel reading; we departed from the lectionary pattern in reading from Chronicles! If you search the Index inside the Sunday lectionary, the First and Second Books of Chronicles are not to be found.

Most people think of those 2 books of the bible as pages and pages of boring lists of genealogy. [Note: That was before Ancestry.com] This was not the view, however, of the renowned German composer: Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750.

In Bach's personal copy of the bible – discovered within the last 50 years – there were many markings in the book of Chronicles! Musicologist and United Church colleague John Derksen reports that Bach's fascination seems to have centred on the passages that record King David's methods for organizing worship. ⁱ

Bach's handwriting in the margin says:

“This chapter is the true foundation of all God-pleasing music”.

In David's temple, the musicians were priests. They played the trumpets, accompanying the Levites, who sang and played other instruments. Today we heard that there were 288 singers in the choir. It was intergenerational (parents and offspring), male and female! The sign of high status in the temple was for priests to be allowed to wear linen robes. The musicians wore linen!

They lived right in the temple, ready at short notice for worship day or night. Their talents were considered pivotal to the expression of praise to God. In the passage we heard a few moments ago there are significant details. Let me recap:

The musicians were dressed in linen to signify their service of God and the people. . .Their voices blended into a perfect sound. . .In that melody, the presence of the Holy One of Israel was manifested.

To the side on this page, Bach scribbled:

”Where there is devotional music, God and God's grace are always present.”

If we do a check in the church history file, we learn that Chronicles 1 and 2 were written many years after the happenings in the temple. Solomon's temple had been destroyed, and the people were in exile, captive in Babylon. Only later were the Hebrew people permitted to return and rebuild the temple where music had been so significant.

In these passages, the bible records post-exilic reflections on the ideal for worship and music. So perhaps there were not 288 in the choir. Maybe someone's pen slipped and there were really 28.

But lifting up an ideal is not bad.

How would our choirs and music leaders ever have the patience or nerve to attempt some of our organ pieces and choral presentations if we did not have an ideal in mind?

In the room today are many choir conductors and singers. Many of them long to see 28 in the choir, much less 288! In 2014, our choral situation in Canada is a competitive one.

Many people who might choose to attend church or sing in a choir now work on Sundays. People who have Sunday as the one free day in their lives often prefer to be free of obligation, which means, of course, not necessarily having to show up at a church at 9 a.m. for the choir warm-up for a 10 a.m. service of worship.

A Choir is also a political entity. Those Levites and priests in King David's temple surely did not smile and cooperate all the time. I recall a time when a female singer said to me (after I suggested she would sound better in the middle of the choir rather than at the end of the row): *I have been here 29 years, and I am an ender. I will occupy the end seat till the day they carry me out.* People will be people.

I am sure each person in this room has a story about a 'personality' in the choir. In a Team Spirit, however, where 2 or 3 or 14 gather to sing, voices blend, and the choir stands to offer prayer and praise in an act of Unity.

Let us reference once again that remark of J. S. Bach:

Where there is devotional music, there is God.

The main thing assigned to ministers of music in our congregations is this:

to communicate the love of God, and to join in the worship of God, responding to the generosity and love of the Creator of heaven and earth. Music ministers can too easily get lost in longing for perfection, the ideal sound or tempo we heard on a recording, or worse, the fear of falling short of an artistic expectation.

But think of Bach's employment situation: was his orchestra always on time?...were his clergy always supportive?...were his singers fresh and perfect at every rehearsal? Certainly not. He never had enough rehearsal time, or enough talented musicians to achieve his ideal.

But, as we all know, the music itself represents his vision of the ideal, a perfect synthesis of theology and preaching and singing and music, *solus Deo Gloria*; (to God alone be the glory).

On the other hand, to present less than our best is not worthy of the mission task to which we as church musicians are called. Our music is directed to God; the congregation happens to overhear it, and in this act of mutual communication, all are inspired to re-create God's shalom on earth.

And if music on a particular Sunday is not quite so inspirational, not quite as excellent, choristers might say to me,

"Well – we certainly botched that one!" my response usually is:

“For those invested in a faith filled life, God repeatedly gives us a second chance. Forgiveness is part of our culture. We all make errors, intended or un-intended. Artistic excellence can be elusive.”

We are Christian; we follow the dictum of Jesus, calling us to forgive seventy times seven times. The next week we strive once more for excellence.

While scanning Harold Best’s book, *Music through the eyes of faith*ⁱⁱ I noted the following:

Excellence is the process of becoming better than I once was.

Excellence is not perfection, it is not being better than someone else, nor even about being like him, her, or them.

Excellence is not winning, although it may include that.

Excellence is not on-again-off-again-ism.

Excellence is not assuming that my way of doing things is automatically excellent simply because I intellectually agree I need excellence.

Excellence is not just practicality and favorable results.

Here’s what excellence is:

Authenticity. Temperance. Servanthood. Excellence is esteeming something better. It is perseverance, hunger, and thirst. Excellence is a process, not an event.

Seeking excellence, we as music leaders journey on, with out-of-tune pianos, balky organs, struggling choirs, miserly budgets, collaborative leadership and demanding worship committees.

With full voices and full hearts, we put on our linen in the midst of God’s people, communicating with all the excellence we can muster as we communicate a glimpse of “Jesus and his glory” on earth for a brief encounter in worship with the Holy of Holies. It is the mandate of *Music United*, the General Council unit represented in your midst today to advocate for the vital ministry of music ~ (you heard correctly: I used the word ministry advisedly) ~ and for the ministers of that act of evangelism: sharing the Good News through song. In the corporate action of singing, we experience Unity with our eyes and with our ears as expressed in the motto of the United Church of Canada: *That All May Be One*.

Let us be united in the prayer that congregations and councils will continue to find ways to embrace music as ministry, securing it in its role of communication amongst the faithful, and bonding the two or three who gather to share a common story.

And with one voice, in unison sound, the people of the ancient temple shouted “Amen.”
And the people of God on this very day in Sunnybrook United, respond: Amen. May it be
so.

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i *Singing Faith Alive*. United Church of Canada Publishing, 2010.

ii Paraphrase of p.108-9 in Best, Harold. *Music through the Eyes of Faith*. HarperCollins, ©1993.