

Music and Mission

The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 7

from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Psalm 146

¹Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! ²I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. ³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. ⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. ⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. ¹⁰The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

Acts 16:16-34

¹⁶One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” ¹⁸She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. ¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”³¹They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

This scene from the Acts of the Apostles is a complex and tangled web of a tale in which the Holy Spirit makes the most compelling connection between the mission of the church and its music. This is a story about faithful disciples who have a bold sense of mission, and awkward, fallible motives. It is about the hard challenge of conveying God's love amid a culture that values money over ministry, and seeks to have peace without working for justice.

This is a story about the work of the church in a broken and fearful world, and how our music encourages the messy, painful, redemptive work of helping usher in the kingdom of God. When the Holy Spirit pushes her wind through the pipes of our lungs – to sing in one voice, there is no stopping the good work we can do. This story is a powerful testimony to the truth of that connection between music and mission.

One of the fascinating things about this story is that Paul does not have some high, holy motive for healing the slave girl, which sets this whole amazing drama in motion. Paul has basically been on a fast moving global Billy Graham kind of crusade to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world. The Apostles began this tour in Jerusalem, sailed to Cyprus, back to visit Syria, are now in the Macedonian city of Philippi, before making their way to Athens.

Paul is a man on a mission with an urgency to share the life-giving love of God for the world, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul's crusade gets interrupted, however, when he basically loses it. In Philippi a demon-possessed child follows Paul and the apostles around shouting that they are slaves to the Most High God. Now, Paul does not heal her at first. He just keeps preaching above the fray. But she keeps up the yelling *for many days*. What a curiosity that the Bible remembers it this way: *Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!”* Paul, very much annoyed, healed the girl so she would stop interrupting him.

(It is refreshing to think that God can use our worst irritations for good! It is nice to know that sometimes, the Holy Spirit can redeem our most self-centered motives. It is encouraging to remember that, in the presence of God, we rise above our most base selves.)

Paul and Silas get into trouble for healing the slave-girl because her special kind of demon possession had enabled her to tell fortunes, and thus earn a lot of money for her owners. When Paul heals her, her owners are irate because the healing stops their financial gain. So they drag Paul and Silas into the town square and say to the rulers, “We’re not against a little religion – as long as it is kept in its place. But these men are foreigners who are disturbing our city by healing people we need to be kept sick.” The crowd joins in, beats them up, and hands them over to the jailer who takes them to jail, and puts their feet in iron shackles.

So the story goes: “About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. . . They are just singing hymns to God, and suddenly the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone’s chains fall off. Knowing what happens to jailers who permit their prisoners escape, the jailer draws his sword and prepares to kill himself. Paul shouts: “Don’t harm yourself, we are all here, just singing hymns to God.” Just singing. The jailer asks: “What can I do to be saved?” In a word: The jailer asks: “What do I need to be free?” Then he and his entire family learn about God’s love, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they are baptized to the tune of great rejoicing.

Friends, in this enterprise of being the church, we cannot separate our mission from our music. Because our hymn singing takes our individual selves and unifies us all in the singular act of praising God. And across all the things that may otherwise divide us as a people, praising God together empowers us to do the work of God in the world.

Karl Barth, arguably the most prominent theologian of the last century, whose theology was forged against the backdrop of the Holocaust of Nazi Germany said: “The Christian church sings. It is not a choral society. Its

singing is not a concert. But from inner necessity, it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression... It is to such supreme expression that the human voice is devoted to the ministry of the Christian community. It is for this that it is liberated in this ministry... The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable forms of ministry in the church.”¹

Karl Barth knew and experienced the power of music to fuel the work of the church to stand up to the evils of fascism that swept across Europe during his day, with its radical authoritarian ultra-nationalism and its violent oppression of all opposition, and its wholesale murderous plot to rid the world of the Jewish people.

We saw that same evil intent unleashed yesterday at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. You might think congregational singing a weak resistance to an automatic rifle, and there is no doubt we need stronger gun laws. But if people are united in one voice – focused on the goodness, love and grace of God – it has power. Laws can change for the better if people come together for good. Singing fueled the Civil Rights Movement. People of faith singing ended Apartheid in South Africa. Candles, prayer and singing brought down the Berlin Wall. It was only a singing church, according to Karl Barth, which would have the power to stand up to the false doctrine of the Nazi state, and to advocate for the peace and justice of all people of every race and creed, by “returning to the unifying faith, love and hope” of God.

This connection between congregational singing and the urgent mission of the church in the world is the reason why our sanctuary pipe organ is one of our most prominent architectural features. The first organs were developed in Egypt in the Third Century before Christ, and originally were intended for entertainment, to accompany plays. About a thousand years later, pipe organs started to appear in monasteries and churches, and as worship spaces enlarged, the organ became the primary instrument to lead congregational singing because it required no amplification.

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 3, chapter 16, paragraph 72, # 4.

Also, the pipe organ, more than any other instrument, with its movement of air like human breath, has the capability to express the full range of human emotion. As the Journal for Reformed Theology has noted:

“From the softest whispers to the grandest fortés, the organ is the only instrument that is capable of producing the sheer scale of volume needed to lead congregational singing, and to provide accompaniment to choirs, as well as the gathering of worshippers, and the sending of them out for service in the world.... While an orchestra can lead hymns and anthems, only the organist can be called upon to improvise or render a different harmony on the spur of the moment. The organ alone can change sounds, pitch and volume by a handful of stops. From the fiery tuba and trumpets to lush strings, the organ is a virtual orchestra unto itself... and during a hymn, the organ asks only one thing of the congregation: Sing with me!”²

Larry and I were traveling this summer after Aretha Franklin died and we listened to most of her long funeral service on the car radio. With all of her fame, prominence and influence on so many others, she always traced her own body of work back to her singing in church. It was her singing in church that propelled her, as one observer noted at the time of her death, “to live most fully in the times,” as well as against the times. Against the times that were replete with racism, sexism and violence.

Ashon Crawley, Professor of Religious and African American Studies at the University of Virginia wrote of Aretha Franklin: “She offered her voice as instrument.” As an instrument, she used her voice for the violated and victimized, always and everywhere.³

Aretha Franklin offered to post bail for those jailed for advocating basic Civil Rights. She stayed in Detroit, and remained a member of New Bethel

² Jonathan Aigner, May 10, 2017.

³ Ashon Crawley, “The Sound Made Flesh,” Aug. 19, 2018, npr.org.

Missionary Baptist Church, where her father preached, offering assistance to church and parishioners. She was made instrument in the service of others. Against the tide of racism and violence and everything that suppresses Christian love, she acted as a conduit for radical care to happen through her. This is a wholly holy endeavor.” From her textured voice we receive the possibility for life because of the hymn-singing life she lived.

We come week after week to church and sing the hymns of our faith. We sing to remember; we sing to find again our center in God; we sing into God’s hope for the future. We sing each week wrapped in the arms of God, singing with joy and thanksgiving, singing through lament and tears. We sing to be lost in the love of Jesus Christ, and we sing to be found – doing his holy, reconciling, redemptive work in the world.

Over and against a world of violence and fear, we sing to be free – free to be Christian disciples who literally breathe the breath of God empowered to do the work of God through praise.

AMEN.