

09.29.24 ~ Pentecost 19
“The Beauty of Music is Unity (Part 2)”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Isaiah 12 ^{NIV}

¹ In that day you will say:

“I will praise you, Lord.

Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.

² Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.

The Lord, the Lord himself, is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.”

³ With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

⁴ In that day you will say:

“Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done,
and proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things;
let this be known to all the world.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.”

Leader: This Is a Song of Praise for the People of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Ephesians 4:14-16 ^{NIV}

¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Leader: These are God’s Reminders through the Apostle Paul.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Creator God, our conductor, liturgist, instrumentalist, lyricist, and strength, we thank you again for this morning’s study and worship together. Help us to recall that it is through you that we find unity, joy, inspiration, comfort, peace, and healing. Through our relationship with you, we discover grace, truth, and salvation. In our worship, we draw nearer to you; in prayer, you meet our needs, and as we make music together, we praise you, thank you for our lives, and refuel for the coming week. Instruct us as we study, listen, and express ourselves. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Thank you to Pastor Francis Phan, Charles, Melissa, Debbie, Elmer, and others who led last week's services and to Roudaina who managed things while I was on vacation. Most of you have heard that despite the rain on the first two days, I had a lovely time in the Outer Banks! Long walks on the beach and up to the inspiring Wright Brothers Memorial, too much food, fish every day, relaxation, shopping, and good sleep all restored my body and my perspective. I am grateful for the ability to take that break and for the time this church provides for its staff leaders.

There is much more to share about Worship than we have time for, so if this music category interests you, there are excellent online resources and books available to dig deeper. I also hope it has been a prayer topic for you, as the Worship Vision Team resumes its work to ponder and explore next steps in that area. As you hear today's message, please open your mind about all the things we consider musical contributions in church: choirs, ensembles, various instruments, the hymns we sing or choose not to sing, the style of music, other sounds (like at Easter when we played the Shofar ram's horn), the importance of volume, rhythm, lyrics, composition, arrangements, electronics, audio and visual components, emotions, and even liturgical dance. Our passages today support our last discussion about how worship music can transform us by shaking up our routines and growing us into new yet sometimes uncomfortable forms of expression.

In Chapter 11, the prophet Isaiah confirms that the Lord will gather the people of Israel and Judah together from all over the world, and in that day of re-gathering, they will be reunited. Early scholars interpreted this to be a reunification after the exile described in Third Isaiah, but

today, we view this as reuniting all of God's people when the Messiah, Jesus, returns. There is more history to this, but for our purposes today, let's focus on his instruction to trust God in all things, praising his holy name because he is their salvation. Singing comes instinctively as we draw waters from this well of salvation. Did you know that in Isaiah's day, the village girls sang at the wells as they drew water? It provided a productive rhythm, calming tone (during potential danger), and focus on beauty as they worked. The music soothed thirsty souls as well as thirsty bodies. This is whole life worship: the daily celebration and praise of Yahweh. Do we sing at the wells of our salvation on days other than Sunday? I hope you do.

Have you ever seen the sun dance on water? Certainly, at the beach or on the lake on a sunny day, the water reflects the sky and reflects the sun sparkling. That image makes me want to sing and praise God's creation, and I certainly did as I walked along the beach recently. In the church, as we consider what we mean by praise music, I think we must ask how can God's radiance be reflected in our music? Only through reverent traditional hymns or classical instrumental pieces? No, it is reflected in our faces and bodies as we sing **together** meaningful lyrics or listen to instrumentalists. Some people reach for God with raised hands, and we must not judge that expression, but embrace it and encourage any action that draws us closer to the Spirit. Has our radiance dimmed by the routine of traditional music? Not intentionally, but some in our culture, especially those we hope to reach for Christ, no longer relate to these reverent hymns and style of music. Has it even become boring to us? Can we recover the radiance of faith in some other style? How can we renew

that brilliance of God's salvation and share with the masses in need of church? Through some of our music diversity, we will continue to water the dry land of routine. Our music department is praying and exploring new routines. They are rich in talents and imagination, and these gifts when expressed, do heal body, soul, and spirit. We are not seeking conflict or worship wars. A singing church is spiritually alive! We just need more voices! Praising God reflects his saving power, and we need to reach today's culture and generation.

The second passage in Ephesians may help us get there. Paul writes to them about how their diverse spiritual gifts strengthen the church family, and in our case the congregation. The church at Ephesus was being distracted by many "New Age" movements of that day, so the Apostle Paul reminded them to focus on Jesus and their unity of faith through the Messiah. This is a good message for music types, tastes, and styles, too. In many churches, changing traditions of worship creates great conflict because the focus on Jesus is lost and becomes self-worship or entertainment. Whatever we propose in the near future must be presented with the Lord's spirit, truth, and love. Are you praying about how we grow and diversify our membership? Are our intentions just to market and grow our church? If so, those efforts will fail. Or is it our intention to grow as believers, transforming ourselves into missionaries, while attracting seekers and the curious to find Christ first through our help?

We offer excellent worship, so please don't hear any criticism from my mouth. We are practicing good stewardship this season, a stewardship of Worship methods, asking responsible questions to ponder God's plans for us. Many churches are closing due to declining membership and

offerings; **we will not!** God has given us a clear vision of growth and influence in our community. Our ministries are beginning to thrive again after the pandemic, yet our church membership, like so many others, is declining. We have abundant resources other than tithes, but the more important observation is that we may not be reaching new people for Christ. How many have been baptized here in the last ten years? Tough realities, but there are many consultants out there writing about and implementing tools that will introduce people to the need for a Savior.

Excellent, relevant, and reverent worship is one major tool. It edifies, engages, and educates congregants about Jesus, no matter your personal preferences. Paul uses the human body to illustrate how we each connect with one another to form a healthy whole. **This is what music can do in a worship service, especially a blended service that transforms and meets individuals wherever they are in their walk of faith.** Any labeled style of worship (whether it's called contemporary, classic, traditional, or blended) is not a cure all; it is not so simple. There are challenges to making any changes, but in all my research about the decades of "Worship Wars," the consensus is that if worship is modelled well and "a healthy congregation will seek consensus on the positives of God's **glory and mission** rather than . . . personal preferences and styles," they have a chance to thrive and grow again.

Let's face facts. We live in a multi-cultural community and county, with Asian, Latin American, African American, and other traditions. Our children and grandchildren are educated together, celebrating culturally diverse holidays and customs. We watch televisions with different language channels available to us. We even shop together and separately

due to our cultures, so why would our traditionally Southern Baptist-style of worship appeal to newcomers? We are no longer Southern Baptists! Shouldn't our language and music reflect more ecumenical and intergenerational trends? Yes, in some ways, we must reflect our culture. I am not commending the theologically incorrectness that Paul writes about, just the expressions of our Christian faith. You may not like classical music or jazz or Christian rock, but can we respect one another's preferences and expressions in humility and generosity? Can we transform our existing service to incorporate varying styles of worship and bring unity to the vast age spans and various cultures that could be represented in church and community? We must seek God's heart on the matter. As we close this session and begin fruitful discussions of our worship plans for the holidays and next year, let us remember this Psalm 5:11-12:

¹¹ But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
 let them ever sing for joy.
 Spread your protection over them,
 that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
¹² Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
 you surround them with your favor as with a shield.

The music we sing brings us together in unity because of Christ, and our mutual belief that he is our savior. Let us keep praying about how music unites us, inspires our Kingdom work, and draws others to us as believers. May we invite others to this concert of faith! Amen! ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we thank you today for these reminders that our comfortable worship could be more transformative to others. Guide our thoughts and creativity to draw others and ourselves closer to you as we

meet and sing in community together. Help us find beauty in our worship and music. May your Spirit inspire and empower us to lead others to you. Jesus, it is in your name we pray, **Amen.**