

## **Telling the Story: In Music**

### **Colossians 3:15-17**

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With the events of the last week, it feels as though we as United Methodists have been reclaiming our heritage as a denomination for all God's people. After all, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, intentionally reached out to those on the margins - the poor, uneducated, and laborers. So, he preached outdoors where anyone could come to hear him, and he preached in the coal mines and the farmers' fields. His deep desire was to reform his church and country by teaching both personal holiness and social holiness, and one of the tools he used in his ministry was music - specifically singing. As a result, as Methodists, singing is in our DNA.

Over the last few weeks, we have been experiencing and exploring ways in which we tell the story of Jesus' life and love through different ministry areas in our church. Last week, we heard about many of the outreach ministries we participate in and how we tell the story through acts of love. The week before we were treated to our youth telling the story in the worship service they planned and led for us. And this week, we celebrate how we tell of God's love through song.

As you may know, Charles Wesley, John Wesley's brother, wrote over 6,000 hymns, many of which, like "Hark the Herald Angels Sing", are still in regular use today. Both Charles and John Wesley published multiple books of hymns for general use as well as for children and for families. Wesley believed that singing taps into our emotions, stirs our passions, and creates a closer connection to God. He thought nothing should get in the way of that connection, so he insisted that congregational songs should be easy to sing. He believed they should only have a melody line rather than harmonies and should teach the beliefs of our faith with accessible but not repetitive words. In many ways, Wesley's expectations for how songs are included in worship were similar to what we now call "contemporary" or "modern" worship.

In 1761, John published a book of hymns and added to it his Directions for Singing. They have been included in every Methodist hymnal since, and you can find them among the first pages of your hymnal. My favorite is number four.

***Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.***

The language sounds strange to us now - how often does someone tell us to sing "lustily" - but they show us how important Wesley considered singing to worship.

Of course, we understand and appreciate that music enhances worship in many ways and in many styles - from the glorious works of Mozart we are hearing today to a simple tune like "Jesus Loves Me" to spirituals to the praise songs which characterize many contemporary worship services.

In her article, "Why We Sing" hymn writer Carolyn Winfrey Gillette says, "We sing because music is a gift from God. It is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, our greatest joys, and our most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us

unconditionally.” We sing, whether in a choir or in the congregation, because music uniquely expresses so many elements of our faith.

Singing brings us together as a congregation, transcending the invisible walls that can divide us. Music crosses generations. We remember the songs we learned in church as children because they taught us about God and about love in a place where, hopefully, we felt God’s presence and the love of the community around us. Music also crosses cultures and languages. Even when we can’t communicate with the same language, we understand the joy of uniting voices in the same tune or rhythm.

Of course, singing is one way we communicate with God. Saint Augustine once said that the person who sings “prays twice”. Through music, we give thanks to God, we share our greatest fears and deepest grief, and we find comfort in knowing that God is always listening.

Singing also teaches us about our faith. Woven into the lyrics of hymns and praise songs is what we believe as Christ-followers. Our faith is formed by the language in the songs we sing. We come to understand God’s grace in our lives, creation and eternal life, and our call to reach out to the world all through the songs we sing. That’s why as clergy and music directors we are so thoughtful about what we choose for congregational singing.

Finally, singing is a means of sharing our faith with others. Just as we learn about Christian beliefs through our hymns and songs, so do people who have not grown up in the church. Music reaches people in ways that words don’t. We find connection with each other and newcomers find connection with a congregation.

Finally, we sing because it gives us a powerful way to advocate for justice. We all know how inspiring it can be to listen to people singing something deeply meaningful to them. We innately recognize there is something sacred and spiritual in what they are sharing with us - and we want to feel that, too. Singing bears witness to God’s work in the world and our part in that work. Think of the power of African Americans singing “We Shall Overcome” during the Civil Rights movement or of the United Methodists at the General Conference on Wednesday when, after the ban on LGBTQ+ clergy was removed, they sang together “Draw the Circle Wide”.

So, go out, friends, and sing lustily – and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. May the music you make stir not just your own soul but that of the people you encounter. And may the songs we sing reflect to others our faith, our joy, and our hope.

May it be so. Amen.