

Psalm 137: 1-4
Nehemiah 12: 27-30
Revelations 5: 11-14

Hymn Sunday Meditation: Singing and the Work of the People
September 4, 2016
Mary R. Brownlow

Today I chose three passages of Scripture, not because they were the appointed readings for today in the lectionary (they are not) but because I wanted to think about singing in our tradition and in our communal life, singing in our liturgy. The word liturgy, which we usually think of as a fancy word for something ministers come up with every Sunday, comes from a Greek root that means “the work of the people.” Hence the title of this sermon: I want us to think about our singing – yours and mine, as today’s choir – as our ministry together.

In the Bible, when we read about singing, it is not a casual reference to entertainment or background music for another activity. People sing from the heart – or in the case of our Psalm reading, they refuse to sing from the heart. The setting of the Psalm is a tragic time, the time of exile from Jerusalem. Some of the defeated Judean people were being transported to Babylon by the conquering army. Once they arrived in that city, the Psalm tells us, they weep with sorrow and nostalgia for their holy city, now destroyed. But their captors want them to stop crying and to start singing: “Sing us one of those great songs you used to sing in that temple!” But those songs are totally out of place, inappropriate in this new place. Those songs would be not only meaningless, but contaminated by performance as entertainment for these violent people. Those songs are not a party piece to be paraded out on command. They are songs to the Most High God, who the Judeans revere even in their tragic circumstances. And so to refuse to sing the Lord’s song is an act of resistance. This was the work of the people, their ministry to each other, in that time and place.

Our reading from Nehemiah (we don’t read much from this book in worship – somehow it does not figure much in the lectionary) is set a couple of generations later. The exiles have returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the city and the temple. Now the mood is quite different. This is a reconvening of the covenant people in a moment of triumph and hope. The wall of the city is to be dedicated with singing – in fact with whole companies of singers. This was the work of the people, their ministry to each other, in that time and place.

And then there is the strange and mysterious Book of the Revelation to John. The passage that was read is visionary: a scene that describes the honoring of Christ the Lamb in the throne room of heaven. And guess what they do? Of course, they sing, starting with the angels, and the elders and the saints, and then including every living creature in creation. The final act of reconciliation between God and creation is done with song. This, then will be the work of the people, their ministry to each other, in that unimaginable setting, beyond time, beyond place.

William Willimon, a United Methodist bishop and writer, told a story about how important it is that we minister to each other through music. At the end of one day Willimon decided to visit a member of his congregation who was a lawyer. He dropped by his office and everyone had gone home but this lawyer who was working late. Starting off the conversation, Willimon asked, “What sort of day have you had?” The lawyer replied: “A typical day...full of misery. In the morning I assisted a couple to evict their aging father from his house so they could take everything while he

was in a nursing home. All legal, not particularly moral, but legal. By lunchtime I was helping a client evade his worker's comp insurance payment. It's legal. This afternoon I have been enabling a woman to ruin her husband's life forever with the sweetest divorce settlement you ever saw. That's my day."

Willimon thought, "What could I say?" But the lawyer continued, "Which helps explain why I'm in your church on a Sunday morning." Willimon replied, "I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed thinking what on earth I have to say in a sermon which might help you on a Sunday."

Then the lawyer said, "It's not the sermon I come for, preacher. It's the music. I go a whole week with nothing beautiful, little good, until Sunday. Sometimes when the choir sings, it is for me the difference between death and life."

Now, I don't tell you that story to put a lot of pressure on you: the quality of your singing voice is not a matter of life and death. But I am telling you about song in Scripture and song in a lawyer's life so that you can recognize what it is we are doing here. We do not perform music in worship. We do not entertain each other in worship. We work together in recognition and worship of the God of life and love: the God who loves the exile and the one returning home, the God who knows our grief and our joy, the God who cares for each of us as a parent does, the God in whose hands we place ourselves in prayer. This worship cannot be done by a minister or a choir alone. It is the work of the people – all the people. We come with our imperfections and trust that our voices are needed as a preview of that heavenly chorus, when all creatures will honk and bray and grunt and sigh and twitter their praises of God. I can't imagine the sound! But today, we do the best we can. We sing to give each other something beautiful to hold onto each week. We sing to support one another in life and in death. We sing because words alone are inadequate to express what "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart conceived: that which God has prepared for those who love him."

So today, I bless each of you for the work you do together, expressed in worship. I bless you for each voice and each note. I bless you as preachers, with me, of the good news of the kingdom. Amen.