

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

September 20, 2009 Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Rededication of the Organ

Psalm 150
Colossians 3:12-14

Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs

Back in 1989 the L.A. Dodgers won the World Series and Johnny Carson's Tonight Show had a 27th anniversary special. Johnny's final guest on the live program was Dodger pitching ace, Orel Hershiser. Johnny asked the pitcher what he did to keep himself calm before games and between innings. Hershiser, a very outspoken Christian, said he sang hymns. Johnny pressed him to sing for the audience.

Hershiser caught Johnny off guard when he sang "Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow." Especially because Hershiser doesn't have the best singing voice. Yet when he finished, the audience broke out into a tremendous round of applause.

Sometimes you just can't help but praise the Lord. Today is one of those days for our church. And so we're getting Psalm 150 from many angles. We're also getting it for another reason.

At last year's Harvest Fair, in the Silent Auction, I put up a sermon for auction. The highest bidder would get to choose the Bible passage and I'd write a sermon on it and together we'd choose the best Sunday for it all. Well, David and Permie won the sermon and chose Psalm 150. Paired with the anthem by Cesar Franck it was perfect for Rededication Sunday. (Make sure you visit the silent auction table again on Sat. and be thinking about what passage you'd like me to preach on...)

As we think about Psalm 150, let's put in the context of the whole Psalter. UCC theologian, Walter Brueggemann, organizes the psalms into 3 types. Psalms of:

- Orientation
- Disorientation
- Reorientation

Psalms of Orientation

Orientation describes periods of stability and status quo. All is well and things seem to make sense. These psalms reflect an order present in the world. God is in His place and all is well in the world. A serenity of hope, or confidence in a divine order permeates these psalms.

Psalms of orientation include creation Psalms, which speak of times when all is right. There's no tension, they state what is. They invite us to think about the world and our place in it, the importance of God's revealed will, the importance of living well. These psalms also cause us to consider our past and its influence on our present, and to express our trust in God's care and goodness

Psalms of Disorientation

These psalms sing a different song – one of lament and complaint. The state of orientation, of well being, collapses and things are stressed. These Psalms are characterized by remembering back to when times were better. They may express resentment toward God or one's enemies – those who cause the disorientation. There is a desire and hope to go back and retrieve the old state of being. There is complaining and protesting and insisting that Yahweh act to put things right.

These are the psalms we read after 9/11, expressing anger, frustration, confusion about God's (seeming?) absence. These are the psalms we read in our personal storms in life. There are also penitential psalms which express regret and sorrow over wrongs we have done.

Interestingly, while these are the psalms we can probably relate to the most, they are rarely read in church. We prefer the psalms of orientation or reorientation.

Psalms of Reorientation

These are the hymns of praise and songs of thanksgiving, filled with images of God's grace prevailing through times of peril often unexpectedly. They are full of joy, hope, and assurance of God's continued presence in the world of the worshiper.

There are psalms of reorientation in which we thank God for what he has specifically done for us and for our community, in which we praise God for who God is. There are psalms which praise God for our homes, and in which we consider the role of political leadership in our communities, and in which we renew our relationship with God

"The Psalms of reorientation are songs of celebration concerning the new orientation and the reestablishment of equilibrium. There is a turning away from the complaining toward praising. There isn't so much a describing of what has been but an assertion of what has just been brought about. There are elements of surprise and wonder, miracle and amazement.

Which brings us to Psalm 150

Which is all about praising God. We get the Where, Why, How and Who of praising God in this Psalm.

Where

(Ps 150:1) Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.

Why are we to "Praise the Lord"? Verse 2 answers this question:

Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.

How

This is pretty much most of the Psalm – we get the full orchestra (verses 3-5).

And lastly we get Who

(Ps 150:6) Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

No one is left out.

As we are reoriented to God in this Psalm our organ has also gone through a reorientation. It not only now works fully and properly, it also sounds better. Even if you can't hear the difference

from before and after the restoration – know that it is there. (Or just ask David and Permie how much more they like playing it now.)

The restoration is also an opportunity to reorient our minds and our hearts as we consider how important music is in our praise of God. I want to share with you again what I wrote earlier this year in the initial fundraising letter for the restoration project.

When we think about the role of music in worship, some are reluctant to use the word *performance* to describe what the choirs and musicians are doing throughout the morning. However, years ago at a conference on Theology and the Arts, I heard a new perspective on this word as it relates to worship. The discussion leader was Eileen Cline, past Dean of the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore.

She shared how she preferred live performances or even recordings of live performances to studio recordings. In a studio recording, the musician(s) play the piece many times and then the producers “cut and paste” the best movements or sections together to create a rendition of the piece that never actually occurred. And those of us listening to the CD’s don’t know the difference – except that what we’re hearing is false and impossible to have actually happened – and is, therefore, NOT a performance, but a manipulation.

A performance, Cline explained, is by definition flawed, human and real. Now think about worship. Worship is **our best offering to God** from our hearts – it is human, it is real and it is flawed. We should not apply the notion of *perfection* to *performance* or to worship. **Worship is and ought to be performance**: it is our best human offering to God, which will always be flawed, but real and genuine nonetheless.

Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard used the metaphor of a performance for worship in this manner. The performers are the congregation; the pastor/worship leaders/musicians are the conductor; and God alone is the audience. This is correct in my view. And so, we **should** embrace what we do on Sunday morning as performance.

And, to this end, we have restored our organ to its original condition. With God as our audience, we ought to offer Him our best. The organ is, I believe, the single instrument most able to express the majesty of God, and so our worship of God is better aided by an organ that can fully function as it was intended.

I invite you to turn in your bulletins to the printed litany of rededication. The text is taken from the original dedication of the organ in 1933 and the hymn we will sing right afterward is the same hymn they sang at that service 76 years ago.

I think it is important to keep ourselves connected to our history – to be mindful of our orientation even as we are reoriented to something new.

And so let us rededicate this organ to the glory of God, even as it was so dedicated 76 years ago. Amen.