First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

10/15/23

Glorifying God

Psalm 98 - MSG

1 Sing to God a brand-new song. He’s made a world of wonders! He rolled up his sleeves, He set things right.2 God made history with salvation; He showed the world what he could do.

3 He remembered to love us, a bonus to his dear family, Israel—indefatigable love. The whole earth comes to attention.

Look—God’s work of salvation! 4 Shout your praises to God, everybody! Let loose and sing! Strike up the band!

5 Round up an orchestra to play for God, add on a hundred-voice choir.6 Feature trumpets and big trombones, Fill the air with praises to King God.7 Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause, with everything living on earth joining in.

8 Let ocean breakers call out, “Encore!” And mountains harmonize the finale—9 A tribute to God when he comes, when he comes to set the earth right. He’ll straighten out the whole world, He’ll put the world right, and everyone in it.

Ever hear of the worship wars? If you haven’t, let me explain. The worship wars are primarily fought over what style of music is used in worship. Will we use traditional instruments, meaning organ and/or piano, and sing the ancient hymns of our faith? Or are we going to use guitars, drums and synthesizers and sing modern day worship songs? This has become a real sticking point for some congregations, and people actually leave churches over this issue. In larger churches, leadership will sometimes create two different worship services, in an attempt to make everyone happy, which basically creates two separate congregations and often doesn’t make anyone happy.

As someone who’s been a professional church organist since I was 17, I’ll admit that, in the past, I have been an active participant in the worship wars. For many years, to my way of thinking, the only “valid” instruments for worship were the organ and piano. Maybe a trumpet or two on Easter, but that was it. I’ll also admit, that in the past, I’ve been a bit of a snob when it comes to church music. After all, the organ has been used in churches for a thousand years, guitars and synthesizers not so much.

My attitude about what constituted “appropriate” music in church began to change when I was hired as the organist for my home church in Seattle. Madrona Grace Presbyterian Church is, as I’ve mentioned before, a predominately African American inner-city congregation which worships in a traditional African American style. So much of the music they sang was new to me and I had to adapt quick if I was going to make it. Honestly, I didn’t like the style at first, but as I grew more accustomed to it, I started paying attention to the words and came to understand what these songs meant to these people. Something in me shifted and I realized that they were truly following the Psalmist’s admonition to praise the Lord, even if I couldn’t see it. So, I had to broaden my concept of what it meant to sing a new song to God and that wasn’t a bad thing at all.

If you look at the first 6 verses of Psalm 150, which we used as our call to worship today, you’ll see that the word “praise” appears 12 times. It’s the key word in this passage, but I also want you to notice what’s not in included. While the psalmist does mention certain instruments, only because these were the musical instruments the writer was familiar with, there is no specific prohibition on what instruments can or cannot be used to praise our God.

For me, it’s become more than an either/or proposition. For me, I’ve come to believe that the worship wars are nothing more than a distraction from what God is calling us to do. We have been called, first and foremost, to worship and glorify God. Everything else becomes secondary to that call and anything that pulls our hearts and minds away from answering that call needs be put aside. If the worship is truly authentic, that is to say not just a performance, then you’ll know it because you’ll feel the presence of the Holy Spirit and honestly, it won’t matter what instruments are played or what songs are sung.

I truly enjoy standing in the middle of a cathedral on Easter Sunday, singing Christ the Lord is Risen Today, at the top of my voice, accompanied by a magnificent pipe organ and full brass ensemble AND I truly enjoy standing in the middle of an evangelical church, singing In Christ Alone, at the top of my voice, accompanied by electric guitars and synthesizers, AND I truly enjoy standing in the middle of an African American congregation, singing Christ is All, at the top of my voice, accompanied by a Hammond organ and drums. Each one of these experiences touches me in different ways, but all of them help me do the same thing; worship and glorify God.

Now, you may not be familiar with the hymn Christ is All, as it’s one that is mostly sung in an African American church context, so let me read the words to the first verse and the chorus:

*“I don’t possess houses or land, fine clothes or jewelry. Sorrows and cares in this old world, my lot seems to be. But I have a Christ who paid the price, way back on Calvary, and Christ is all, all, and all this world to me. Christ is all, he’s everything to me, Christ is all, he rules the land and sea, Christ is all without him nothing could be, Christ is all, all and all, this world to me.”*

These words have stuck with me ever since I first heard them at Madrona Grace. They seem to perfectly capture the reason why we should be praising and glorifying God don’t you think?

Siblings in Christ, worrying about what style of music used to praise God is nothing more than a waste of time. It doesn’t matter if it’s traditional, contemporary, gospel or some combination of the three. Yes, we all have our preferences, but arguing about which style is best only distracts us from the purpose of gathering for worship. So, let’s focus on what matters, when it comes to music in worship, and the only thing that really matters is using our music for the glorification and praise of the God who created us all. AMEN