

To the Glory of God Alone

Hebrews 13:7-16

Today we come to celebrate the gift of music. Music that speaks to our souls and lifts our spirits. Music that deepens our faith and often leads us to expressions of praise to God. Our closing hymn this morning says it beautifully: “When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride, it is as though the whole creation cried Alleluia. How often making music, we have found a new dimension of sound, as worship moved us to a more profound Alleluia.” And that’s what this day is all about. We come to sing our Alleluias this morning and give our praise to God through music. The writer of the book of Hebrews emphasizes this importance of praise. He declares in verse 15 of our Scripture reading: “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise. – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.” A sacrifice of praise. It is in that spirit we gather this morning as we celebrate our ministry of music. And it is in that spirit that we give thanks to God for our music director for the past 35 years, Mr. Glenn Rodgers. Glenn has been a faithful and dedicated servant of Jesus Christ and his musical direction and playing has been such a moving testimony of the power of God through music. But we have also received from his personal witness and demonstration of the love of God for this church and the people he has served. Glenn has certainly seen his work as not only leading a music program, but as being a ministry for Jesus Christ. There have been prayer sessions of deep impact in choir rehearsals, there have been many moments of sharing faith experiences not only in music gatherings, but among staff, and in one-on-one conversations. We are going to deeply miss his leadership, but know that the impact and influence of his work here will continue for years to come.

And so today we come to celebrate music...to give thanks to God for the song the Lord put in our hearts. The Psalm writer exclaims: “ Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise His name, proclaim his salvation day after day.” What a difference it makes in life when we can carry the song God has given to us in our hearts. Music has a way of stirring the soul, and it becomes the means of allowing us to express the praises of our heart. We were discussing this very thing this past week In our staff meeting thinking about songs

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that we remember that speak to our souls. Praise choruses that lift our spirits. Great hymns of the faith that have such great meaning and remind us of the nature of God and God's work in our life.

There are those times when we feel especially close to God and we cannot help but want to sing our praises. It is the attitude conveyed in one of our praise choruses this morning: "How Great is our God."

The song was composed by Chris Tomlin who in an interview said : "I wrote that song when I was living in Austin, Texas. I remember sitting on my sofa in my little apartment. And Psalm 104 was the psalm I was looking at. It said, 'You our lord are very great. You're clothed with splendor and majesty, wrap yourself with light as with a garment' – through those opening verses and just describing a little bit of God, the glory of majesty, that little chorus came out. I started singing the chorus and, man, I had no idea, I thought the chorus was just a little simple thing and it was. And I had no idea it would become such a song in the church, and a song that finds its way in so many different cultures, different languages. It's so transferrable, so accessible." That song is often paired with another great hymn of praise, which we did this morning: How Great Thou Art. Both songs allow us to express a sense of wonder, and adoration, and worship as we give praise to a loving and almighty God.

But you know we all go through those times when we don't feel like singing. We may be going through a rough time in our life. Things aren't going the way we planned. We get down and discouraged and it is difficult to remember that song God has given us. But I wonder if it is in those times that we need the songs the most. To remind us of God's faithfulness and to lift our spirits as we begin to sing our praises. It makes me think of Paul and Silas, in a prison cell, having been whipped and beaten. Feeling the pain of their suffering, yet in such a trying time, a strange sound comes forth from that prison at the midnight hour. It was not the sounds of despair, or complaining or defeat. Echoing off the walls were sounds of praise, as Paul and Silas were praying and doing what? Singing hymns to God. And in doing so not only were their hearts feeling the freedom of the Spirit, but they are physically set free from their captivity. That's a tough lesson for us, but

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an important one...because we all know that life can get very challenging, we can get overwhelmed...we caught up in our troubles. Feeling imprisoned by our circumstances. But as we focus on our deliverer...as we lift our voice in prayer, and in praise and song, we find the joy of knowing God's presence in the midst of our struggles and problems.

Today we come to give praise God, to worship the God who knows us and loves, and to express our thanks for the ministry of music in this place. Today we give thanks for the musical leadership and ministry of Glenn Rodgers. How grateful we are for all who share their musical gifts, through voice and instrumentation. That together we can express our praise and witness in song. That as we celebrate on this music Sunday we seek to do it all for the purpose of giving God the glory.

I found it very interesting that the initials JJ. and SDG appear on the works of the great composer, Johann Sabastian Bach. "Even after 250 years, his musical masterpieces continue to inspire and lift our spirits. Before Bach would write a single note, he would write JJ on the top of the page. Those initials, JJ, stood for *Jesu Juva* which means "Jesus, help me." And when a work was complete, Bach would write on the bottom of the page SDG which stood for *Soli Deo Gloria*, meaning "To the glory of God alone". For Bach it was an understanding that the Creator was the originator of art and music. And his gift of music would reflect the transforming power of God."* Glenn shared with me that is the motto of the AGO, American Guild of Organists: Soli Deo Gloria...To the Glory of God Alone.

Thanks be to God for the gift of music. The beautiful hymns, the inspiring anthems, the uplifting choruses... expressions of praise, and worship. Expressions of deep emotions and heart-felt faith. And as we seek to live our out our faith, we discover that it is through music our souls connect to the God who made us. So may God be glorified through our music and through our daily living. May we seek to live in that spirit of SDG...Soli Deo Gloria – To the Glory of God alone.

*From Nelson Okanya, President of Eastern Mennonite Mission