



Date: August 23, 2015

Title: "You Should Sing in the Choir!...Or Not."

Description: This sermon describes some of the basic elements that develop and strengthen our faith. (You can discern from the title that music is one.)

Scripture: Colossians 1:9-14

"You Should Sing in the Choir!"

You really should, you know—sing in our choir. Especially if you can't sing a note. Because we love to make Steve earn his pay! And if you can sing a note, or maybe even two or three notes, then this choir's for you.

I'm not offering an infomercial. I'm preaching. Singing in a choir can make your faith stronger. It offers a way of giving to the church and of serving God that's accessible to real people, someone like you. You don't have to be a Bible scholar, the Dali Lama of spiritual wisdom, or enjoy the company of a dozen two-year-olds. There are 31 voices singing in the choir this morning; 26 of them already know that a person with a very average level of talent can be part of a superb choir that produces breathtaking music, far above what any individual can bring to the table. Being part of anything at that level of quality is an unforgettable experience!

Singing in the choir also offers you some spiritual discipline. I pay a monthly fee to do something at LA Fitness that I could do just as well at home. But I never do sit-ups or curls or knee bends at home. This choir is the LA Fitness of church music, giving you a group of people who are expecting you at rehearsals. You've been meaning to attend worship more regularly; a choir will tend to get you here just about every week! It offers the accountability that helps you actually realize the spiritual growth you've desired.

The very best part is...you get lost in the choir. At least you get lost in the music. When I've sung with this choir, here's how it goes. The first few rehearsals of a new anthem take me way out of my comfort zone. I hope I'm singing somewhere near the right notes, but mostly it's a real mess. Then I begin to get it right, if I concentrate and there's someone really good sitting next to me. Finally, a week or so before "show time," I have it! I find myself singing with confidence and then I can allow Steve to help us interpret the music, absorb the meaning of the lyrics, feel it. It stops being a puzzle I'm trying to solve and becomes music.

Then follows the best part of all—becoming lost in the music. Everything else disappears: the size of attendance that morning, the meeting I have during lunch, slight

backache I've had for two or three days. Everything disappears but the music, and I am lost, lost in wonder, love and praise. Let me tell you, folks, that's a fine way to be lost!

When it's over, what have you done? The anthem ends and the carpet isn't cleaned, no homeless people have been fed, the budget isn't met. What you've sung is a pure offering to God. It's offered, then within 2½ - 3 minutes, it's gone. It is an offering to God alone. That is a rare opportunity. I want you to have that experience. You should sing in the choir. You, too, can sound like this:

ANTHEM

“...or Not!”

If you want your faith to grow strong, you should put it to music. If you want to have a deeper sense of God's presence, sing it. The power of music to penetrate your life, to shape your experiences, and then to stay with you is mind-blowing. Some people are learning that music is mind-saving.

Watch this opening scene from “Alive Inside”, a documentary about research being done among elderly. (Show first 2:18)

Most Sundays I don't sing the choir's anthem. But I do sing the hymns. Every time I sing a hymn I figure that when I get so old and so faded that maybe all I'll have left is the music I've stored there. Unfortunately for me, I was a teenager in the early days of Rock 'n Roll, so much of my stored repertoire consists of “Tutti-Fruitty, all-a-rooty! Whap-bop-aloo-bop-alip-bam-boom!” But I want some of the music inside me to be “How Firm a Foundation, You Saints of the Lord” and “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” or “God, Be the Love to Search and Know Me.”

I believe the highlight of our thirty years of worship happened two years ago when we got our new hymnals, “Glory to God.” It contained many of the old hymns that will never leave or forsake us. It also gives us hymns with words that mean something; singable melodies coupled with words that relate to living are a powerful duo. It also opens up new vistas to express our faith. When we sing “Glory to God Whose Goodness Shines on Me!” this place---*this* place rocks!

When we sing together, we sing *together*, and that's cool. Standing in the congregation, I can hear your voices around me (which is a little scary because it means they can probably hear me as well.) Although maybe this one thinks Donald Trump is a disaster and that one thinks Trump is a breath of fresh air, for a few minutes as we sing, we're all on the same page. We are one in the Spirit, and they'll know we are Christians. And for a few minutes, the love of God isn't coming from the choir or the pulpit; Oh, Christ surrounds me! Oh! Christ surrounds me!

When we've finished the benediction and I'm on the drive home, I take these hymns with me. More accurately, they take me, as I hum them in the back of my mind

at surprising moments through the next day or so. Christ continues to surround me, day and night.

I love it when we sing! Let's do it now. Hymn # 543.

Mountains or Fountains

They were standing by a well in the blazing desert of a Middle Eastern day, sharing a drink of cool water. Two strangers, they risked causing a scandal by even talking to each other—a woman talking with a man who was not her husband, a Jewish rabbi engaging a Samaritan. Naturally, the conversation led to religion.

She had been told all kinds of conflicting, complicated claims about how to please God, where to find God. One of the hot button arguments centered on which worship center was the most holy. Seeking a spiritual mountain-top experience, you need to know which mountain is most bona fide. Like so many spiritual seekers today, she seemed confused, disillusioned, more than a little frustrated. So she brings up this my-mountain-is-better-than-your-mountain controversy, inviting this traveling rabbi to render his opinion on the correct piece of topography.

You know ahead of time that Jesus isn't going to answer her question. Not directly, anyway. Jesus was not into question-and-answer religion. Instead, he says, in essence, "That's a surface question about religion. You're looking for something deeper and more satisfying, something that's a cool drink of pure water for your spirit. By-the-numbers religion just starts arguments about who's right and who's wrong. I'm inviting you into a deeper level where your spiritual thirst is fulfilled.

So Jesus turns her attention away from a solid, external, fixed *mountain*, and helps her envision instead a flowing spiritual *fountain*, an aquifer beneath her feet. There are so many mountains of religion that end up dividing mountain people from valley people. The fountain of the Spirit, he tells her, is accessible to everyone. You don't argue about a fountain; you just drink from it.

For thirty years, Pleasant Hill Church has endeavored to be a fountain, a place that flows with a living, breathing relationship with God. Flowing through all this organization, all these committee meetings, all the air conditioning repairs is something spiritual that you can use, can put into practice.

We knew something thirty years ago before we held our first gathering of PHPC, something that is even more true today: success, power, career, even family don't meet all our needs. Life has a sacred dimension, and that sacred dimension flows underneath everything. Connecting faith with life, this church touches that dimension. If your spirit isn't fed here, you're wasting your time.

Sometimes when we are here, fireworks go off and tears of joy flow as we are almost overcome with God's touch. Dramatic spiritual experiences happen here, but

they are pretty rare. Otherwise they wouldn't seem dramatic, they'd seem routine. I'm convinced that daily, ordinary, routine spiritual practices shape our lives far more than dramatic spiritual conversions.

Here we think together, in Sunday School classes and Bible studies and book clubs. Inspiring thoughts stimulate us and foolish thoughts (other's, of course, never our own) push us to clarity about our own views. Here we think together, because engaging your mind will develop your faith.

Here we pray together, offer a supporting hug when someone is almost crippled with sorrow. Often God touches us through human touch. Here, in tangible acts of kindness and help, we engage in the nuclear center of all that Jesus brought us. All that matters in life, all our dreams, all that we hunger for conveyed in three short words: love each other. And the inseparable companion of those words: love your neighbor.

We've made a lot of mistakes in the past thirty years at PHPC. But I hope we've never settled for humdrum habits. Sometimes we make each other uncomfortable. Because sometimes we ask a lot of you and lead you to stretch your boundaries, venture beyond your comfort zones. This may not come naturally to you. That is too bad. You know the saying that crazy is doing the same thing and expecting different results? Perhaps it is time to try something different in your spiritual life. Maybe it is time to experiment. It may not work. That is the very definition of experiment. But then again it might, and you may become a better, stronger, healthier person for it. Your faith may grow to new heights. At the least, you will be more interesting.