

Perhaps I should begin with a clarification: the title of this homily does not refer to individuals who are not blessed with the ability to carry a tune or even to match pitch. Nor does it extend to those whose voices are, shall we say, of the alley-cat variety. Our time singing hymns today is not a consolation prize for all whose lot in life is such that their voices will not lead them to headliners anywhere. When we say that this is “singing for those who can’t,” what we mean is this: we who sing the songs of faith do so for those who are, for whatever reason, unable to do so. That’s basically the point of the message: we who are able sing for those who are unable.

There is something extraordinarily elemental about singing. I know that there are folks who don’t particularly like to sing; I am not one of them. I am unabashedly a church music junkie, and I suspect I am not alone in this category. Singing as an act of praise to God is about as tactile and tangible an expression of faith and thanksgiving for creation as we may engage in. Think of it: the whole body is an instrument engaged in giving witness to God’s goodness.

I think perhaps that is why some folks are bashful about singing. It is decidedly, avowedly personal. No one’s voice is your voice, whether it is good, bad or indifferent. No one can praise God in song like you can.

In this, the human voice differs from other instruments. All other instruments allow for what is offered to be mimicked or replicated. If Walter presses middle C on the organ console and holds it for one second and I were to go back there and press middle C for one second, the sound would be more or less identical. But when we sing, it is our own voice, and it is thrilling in the Lord’s sight.

We are made for praising God. It is a part of our purpose. To be sure, there is some variety in the reasons given for God's creation of humanity, but the Bible steadily hints that our function is to make witness to God's goodness. That's what praise is. In the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Standards, in our Book of Confessions, the question is asked, "What is the chief end of man?" (My apologies for the exclusive language, but that is how it was asked.) The answer is given: "to glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Our chief function is to glorify God. And God delights in our praise.

Do you think of God delighting in our delight? God wants our happiness and our wellbeing, and when we sing praise, we give voice to the goodness of creation and our places in it. It is good to give praise. It is good to sing.

But there are those who cannot. The world over, there are those whose political environment is such that to gather in praise in a public place, to sing hymns, psalms and spiritual songs, in Paul's words, is an impossibility. We sing for them. We sing because they cannot. The body of Christ understands that where the mouth is silenced in one place, it is opened in another.

Indeed the Psalms, from which we read today, are the hymnal of ancient Israel. The psalms are the songbook and prayer-book for worship. Many were written in times of oppression, when the people of Israel had no temple in which to worship, where they did sit down by the waters of Babylon where they were enslaved and weep. It may seem strange to say this in a sermon about praise and singing, but singing gives voice to our weeping as well. The Psalms, that hymnal of the Israelites is not without pathos. Yes, the words of Psalm 150 are a robust *hallelujah* to God, the final *hallelujah* of the book,

but in and amongst the words of praise are words of lament. And this is as it should be.

No singing to God is complete unless it is the sharing of our whole selves, in praise, in lament, honestly and candidly. God delights in the sharing of ourselves with God.

We sing for all whose circumstances prevent them from gathering together to sing. Our voices are for them.

We sing as well for those whose life experiences won't allow them to sing to God. There are those, perhaps some of you here have been in this situation, for whom the experience of faith is not a blessing or a gift, but an experience of pain and sorrow. We sing for them too.

A number of years ago I was at the funeral for the man whose name I carry, my great uncle. My great-grandfather, I am told, was a dogmatic man whose faith would allow no uncertainty, no freedom to think outside certain parameters. He was a member of a small church in North Carolina, outside of which he believed there was no salvation. So convinced was he of this certainty that he sold his business in Georgia and moved his family to rural North Carolina where he would try his hand at farming. He was a good businessman, I am told, but a lousy farmer. His family suffered. His children grew up in the environment of harsh pietism. Half of them rejected all faith as a result. My great uncle was in the half that rejected all church. If this was church, he wanted no part of it. He would not darken the doors for many years.

It happened that his wife was attending the Methodist church down the street from where they lived and she finally grew tired of dragging the children there by herself and she issued an order: sit still and shut up. "You don't have agree with the preacher," she said,

“You don’t have to believe a word, you don’t even have to listen. But you do have to sit there. I’m not doing this on my own anymore.”

Uncle Tony eventually became friends with the Methodist pastor. That is a streamlined version of a process that took close to thirty years, but at the time of his death, he asked that the hymn, “It is Well with My Soul,” should be sung. We sang it for all who could not.

God wants our praises and God wants our selves. That is why we sing.

We do not sing because God needs us to. We do not sing because we want to change God. Much like with prayer, our singing changes *us*! Because music in worship is the extension of prayer in worship. Whether it is the hymns we sing together, the sung prayers of the people, or our wordless performances offered in praise to God, it is prayer and it changes us.

So finally, we sing because we need to sing. We sing because we have the responsibility to sing for those who cannot. We sing because we can. And with our song, God is delighted!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.