

Ephesians 1:3-14

### A SONG WORTH SINGING

Anne Lamotte, after years of drug addiction, suicide attempts, and great depression, tells about the Sunday when she heard the sounds of gospel music coming from a little church across the street. The building was not much to look at. It was just a little ramshackle building with a tiny cross on top of it. But, she said, the music forced her to stop and listen. She heard words of gospel songs she remembered from her childhood. Week after week she would come back, stand outside the doors and listen. After many weeks she got up the courage to move to the doorway of the church and listen to the songs. The choir of five black women and one white man were making glorious music. The congregation of 30 or so seemed to radiate kindness and warmth. She began to go back about once a month, always slipping out before the sermon. She grew to love many things about the church, their care for one another, their community mission program, the way they welcomed strangers. But she writes, “It was the singing that pulled me in and split me wide open.” She got the courage to walk inside, sit in the back, and let the singing envelop her. That music, she said, was breath and food.

She writes, “Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life.” (Anne Lamotte, *Traveling Mercies*, pp. 46-48)

People of faith have shared the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the gift of song for almost two thousand years now. The old, old story has been told through many different forms of music in order to get the story out there and bring it to the attention of others. Whether it’s offered through the old, familiar, traditional hymns of the Church, through chants, camp songs, spirituals, cantatas, contemporary music, Southern gospel, rock music or some other musical expression, the story of Jesus has been set to music in order to draw people into the story of what God has done in and through Jesus Christ. However, the Gospel is sung, it is a song worth singing!

It makes sense that the Gospel story is told and shared through many different musical mediums because the story of Who God is and what God has done on our behalf naturally calls forth praise from us. And, what better way is there to express our praise and thanksgiving to God than through the sacred beauty of music and song?

It’s quite likely that the scripture reading for today, Ephesians 1:3-14, was a hymn of praise that the Apostle Paul and the early Church sung to the glory of God. With regard to this passage, Dr. William Barclay notes that it is so long and so complicated because it represents not so much a reasoned statement as a lyrical song of praise. While we cannot see this reality in the English translation, in the Greek, this entire passage is one single sentence. It’s as if Paul can’t stop thinking of God and praising God. Paul’s mind races on and on as he contemplates the glory of God and the grace of God at work on our behalf. Paul simply cannot stop; he must continually praise the Lord.

If you look carefully at the passage – given the fact that the passage has a hymn-like quality to it – there are three stanzas with each stanza giving praise to each Person of the Trinity. Verses 3 through 6 speak of what God the Father has done for us by way of

the eternal decree and the divine plan. Verses 7 through 12 reveal what God in Christ has done for us in fulfilling God's plan. And, verses 13 through 14 point out that Christ's work has been made real to us and has been made alive by the working of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, after each stanza, the Apostle Paul concludes with a refrain that sums up the meaning of the hymn: "to the praise of God's glory." In light of God's love for us all, the only appropriate response is to praise God. Likewise, the old Westminster Catechism began by asking the question, "What is the chief end of man?" And, the acceptable answer was: "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever."

What I find to be really fascinating about this passage of scripture is Paul's emphasis on what God has done. God took the initiative and acted on our behalf; we did nothing at all. All we can do is to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. According to Paul, here are the reasons why God should be praised: God creates, God destines, God wills, God reveals, and God accomplishes the divine plan. And, when it comes to humankind: God has blessed us with all spiritual blessings; God has chosen us before the foundation of the world; God has predestined us to be his children; God has accepted us; God has redeemed us through Christ; God has given us wisdom; and, God has sealed us with the Holy Spirit.

This passage inspires us to sing a song worth singing because it's all about divine grace. There's not one word here about human accomplishments. Our song couldn't carry a tune if it were based solely on human effort and achievement. We are totally dependent on the grace and the mercy of God. And, once we see life from that perspective, then our hearts are filled with joy, our mouths open and burst forth in praise, and we sing a song worth singing in gratitude to God and all that God has done.

As we read through this passage, we detect several movements. As we have already noted, this is a hymn sung to God. The *vertical* dimension of this hymn is primary. We always start with our focus on God. Then, the next movement is *horizontal* in nature. While the hymn is sung in praise to God, it is addressed to the world as well. God truly loves the creation. Heaven touches earth and the heavenly Father knows and loves all his children, the world over. Also, the hymn becomes *personal*. Note the personal pronouns the Apostle uses: "*We* have obtained an inheritance, having been destined... *we* who were the first to set our hope on Christ. *You* have heard the word of truth.... The gospel of *your* salvation."

Finally, while this hymn is focused on the grace of God, there is a hint of our response going a step further than just praising and thanking God. You almost have to read between the lines, but the Apostle Paul calls the saints to be active participants in doing whatever we can to bring into unity everything in heaven and on earth, to witness to the new heaven and new earth that are underway in the world. Paul claims that God has made known the divine will, which he set forth in Christ, and that was – as a plan for the fullness of time – to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. God is calling us to do our part to help, by reaching out in love, to bring everything together into a unified, harmonious whole under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes, we are deluded into thinking that, unless we do something grandiose, our efforts to reconcile and unify everything really don't count for much within God's kingdom. We forget that something as simple as food offered to a hungry person, a drink of water offered to one who thirsts, or a visit and human contact to one who is sick, imprisoned, or lonely – when it's offered in love – is good enough for Jesus.

The *New York Times Magazine* (July 1992) carried a haunting photograph. It pictured a middle-aged man with long hair and a great bushy mustache. He was dressed in formal evening clothes. He was sitting in a café chair in the middle of a bombed-out street. In the background you could see the front of a bakery where mortar fire struck a breadline in late May of that year, killing twenty-two people. The man is playing his cello. He was a member of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra. There was little he could do about hate and war, which had been going on in Sarajevo for centuries. But for twenty-two days he pulled up a chair and cello at the very time those people had been killed, 4:00 p.m. and began to play. Serbian bombs crashed around him from time to time. Over and over he played the same sad piece of music, Albinoni's moving Adagio in G Minor. This particular piece of music was constructed from a manuscript fragment found in the ruins of Dresden after the Second World War. The music survived the firebombing. Perhaps he chose to play this Adagio over and over for twenty-two days in the scarred streets of his beloved Sarajevo because he knew that story from Dresden. He honored those who died waiting in a breadline. Many thought him foolish. Yet it is hard to forget the man with his cello. His beautiful twenty-two day protest said that something beautiful must triumph over horror. (Robert Fulghum, *Maybe (Maybe Not: Second Thoughts from a Secret Life)*, Villard/Random, 19993)

So also, the noted English poet George Herbert was a member of a small group of friends who periodically met to play musical instruments. One night on the way to a meeting of the group, Herbert passed a man whose cart was stuck in a muddy ditch. He immediately put his instrument aside and went to help. When the cart was finally freed, George Herbert was covered with sticky clay. When he finally arrived at the meeting, he apologized for his tardiness and his muddy appearance. They said, "George, you have missed all of the music!" George Herbert only smiled and said, "Yes, but I will have songs at midnight!" (James Moore, *You Can Get Bitter or Better*, pp. 74-75)

Let us join with Christ and each other and do what we can to bring into unity everything in heaven and on earth. Let us strive to blend our voices and our talents together. And, let us hope that our song and our efforts to help and unite will enable others to join in with us and sing the song that is worth singing to the praise of God's glory – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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