

## *THE POWER OF MUSIC*

Ephesians 5.19

May 6, 2018, Diverse Harmony Sunday

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

If you are wondering where the sermon is this morning, we have been singing it.

When Psalm 98 says, “Sing a new song,” we sang, “Alleluia, Alleluia, Praise the One with one great voice.” Given all those old voices out there that try to divide us, finding a voice that would bring us together would be a *new* kind of song.

And there is a whole sermon in that.

In fact, a couple thousand years ago, a letter was written to a community in Ephesus that was having trouble figuring out how to be different people in this one new community they imagined. The author wrote to them to say that God is in the business of breaking down the dividing walls between us. And those walls are not made out of our differences, differences are fine. They can be beautiful. The walls that divide us are built out of the *hostility* we have toward one another based on those differences. So, the author says, God is that power that breaks down those walls of hostility that divide us in order to create “one new humanity.”

And how is that going to happen?

So, at the end of the letter, the author sends along this recommendation: “Speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to God.” In other words, if you want to be this new kind of community learn to communicate with one another not just through words, but with the kind of movement and feeling and tenderness and power that music has.

Do you think music has that kind of power?

We have the experts with us this morning because the Diverse Harmony singers are here. And they are, after all, “*diverse harmony*” - communicating with one another and with all of us the kind of harmony that can be created as we honor diversity and begin to dismantle those walls of hostility.

I was reading a story the other day about Karim Wasfi. Karim is a famous Iraqi cellist. And when three car bombs ripped through Baghdad, he went to the place where the bombs had gone off and started playing his cello on the spot. Talking doesn't seem to be getting anywhere. So Karim thought his music might communicate in a different way – that music itself would show “resilience” in the face of violence.

And then he created an organization that “unites youth from different ethnic backgrounds so they can play music on the streets of Baghdad.” He wants to “flood the scene with culture and beauty, against intimidation and fear,” he says. He believes in the power of music and that making music together can create a whole new way of being that can stand up against violence and intimidation and fear.

If you want to create a new kind of community and a new kind of world, Ephesians says, “Speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts.”

And, as some folks say: “That'll preach.”

When Spectrum sang for us Stephen Merritt's “The Book of Love,” they were singing a sermon about the paradox of the human condition and the power of just singing – “You can sing me anything.” The lyrics say:

*The book of love has music in it.*

*In fact that's where music comes from*

*Some of it is just transcendental  
Some of it is really dumb  
But I, I love it when you sing to me*

Music can unmask us. Music makes us laugh and it makes us cry. Music connects us to the past and helps us imagine the future. Music can lift us up to do powerful things – can you even imagine the civil rights movement without music? – and it can anesthetize us with the superficial so that we are numb to the injustice in the world.

In other words, music shows us ourselves. W.A. Mathieu (Mehchew) says that:

*You are made of music – lonely music when you are lonely, vast music when you feel vast, even happy music sometimes. The whole stream of your life, already musical, is simply waiting for you to hear it.*

Sometimes I lose track of who I am. And then someone sings to me. And I remember. Their singing reveals myself to me. It shows me some brokenness I have been avoiding or some longing I have abandoned.

When I hear you sing, “I Love the Lord,” I can’t help but think about Whitney Houston and all the times her amazing voice touched that raw place in my heart – the place where I am keenly aware of that longing inside of me for a deep connection with something bigger than myself.

There is definitely a sermon in that.

And then the choir and Diverse Harmony come in with the music of Moana – which is timely given the volcanic eruption on the Big Island of Hawaii right now. This imaginary young Hawaiian girl sings:

*I can lead with pride, I can make us strong  
I’ll be satisfied if I play along  
But the voice inside sings a different song*

She is singing about that voice that calls us out to that place where the sky meets the sea – out to a new horizon.

And there ought to be a sermon in that because it's time for us, beloved ones, not to just be satisfied with playing along but to listen for that voice that calls us out to some new horizon.

Pastor and composer, Al Carmines says:

*Faith is such a simple thing.*

*It can't talk, but only sing.*

*It can't reason, but it can dance.*

*Take a chance. Take a chance.*

Maybe the test of a good sermon and a great song is that they incite us to take a chance – to take a chance on the world and on one another and on our own lives; to take a chance on love; to move out into the world with that courageous imagination that won't settle for the way things are but is drawn toward that place where the sky meets the sea.

It's probably not coincidence that, on the night Jesus shared that last supper with his friends, Matthew and Mark say that “when they had sung a hymn,” they went out. The last thing they did together before they went out to face that new horizon for all of them was to sing.

And so we come to this table this morning, singing – singing the music that comes to us from those slave ancestors in South Carolina who knew suffering and the need for mercy but they also looked toward that new horizon and turned their faces toward that rising sun of hope and freedom.

If that isn't a sermon I don't know what is. It's not enough to play along. It's time to take a chance on that voice inside us that calls us to a new horizon of hope. So, like I say at the end of every sermon, today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Lea Suter's article about Karim Wasfi is found at [www.goodnewsnetwork.com](http://www.goodnewsnetwork.com). W.A. Mathieu is quoted by Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat in *Spiritual Literacy* (Scribner, 1996), p. 299 and Al Carmines also in *Spiritual Literacy*, p. 153.