

Date: January 21, 2007

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 3

**SERMON: The Ministry of Music**

Text(s): 2 Chronicles 5:11-14; 1 Corinthians 12

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Isn't the Internet wonderful? A few days ago, I thought to myself, "I'd like to find some good quotable quotes about music for the sermon this week." So I typed the words "music quotes" into the little Google window on my browser, and lo, and behold, within a split second or two, I had all the quotes I could ever dream of wanting, much less using. Of course, the quotes were just there by themselves, attributed to whoever said them, but with no context whatsoever. That's the not-so-wonderful thing about the Internet. It almost compels shallowness. But since I intend to supply the context this morning, I'll risk sharing four context-less quotes I found to stimulate our thoughts.

I love the observation by American composer Michael Torke: "Why waste money on psychotherapy when you can listen to the [Bach's] B Minor Mass?" I expect that there are a fair number of us here for whom that observation resonates.

In the same vein, pianist, composer, and comedian Oscar Levant, when he was stopped by a traffic cop and given a speeding ticket, explained, "You can't possibly hear the last movement of Beethoven's Seventh and go slow."

We would probably also agree with Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes when he said, "Take a music bath once or twice a week for a few seasons. You will find it is to the soul what a water bath is to the body."

But I think that for our purposes this morning, this statement by the late William P. Merrill, pastor of both the First Presbyterian and Brick Presbyterian churches in New York City during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is particularly pertinent. Merrill was also a hymn writer who wrote, among others, the hymn *Rise Up O Men of God*. Merrill certainly spoke for me when he said,

"There is nothing in the world so much like prayer as music is."

One of the reasons that so many of us love this church is precisely because of the spiritual nourishment we receive week after week through the ministry of music.

That ministry is exercised by every one of us in some way, whether it be by joining in enthusiastically (or sometimes not so enthusiastically) in singing hymns or chants, or whether it be by singing in one of the choirs, or playing the bells or another instrument. Together we make music a vital part of our worship experience, and we minister to one another and to ourselves through that music. We both give and receive spiritual nourishment; music is part of our private and public prayer.

We would all be on a poorer musical and spiritual diet if it were not for the one whose musical gifts are so abundantly offered to us each Sunday. Today is Ray Cornils's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary as our Director of Music, and it's a day for all of us to celebrate the gifts that Ray offers to us and the gifts he enables us to offer one another in song and instrument each week.

I think all of us know that Ray is not merely a Director of Music as his title indicates. We all recognize that Ray brings much more to our worship service each week than good music performed well. Ray brings his whole heart and soul with him into this service, because for Ray, the musical performance is not an end in itself; rather, it is a ministry to and with the people of God to help all of us worship better.

And for that reason, the Church Council decided to recognize that by changing Ray's job title from Director of Music to Minister of Music, to more accurately reflect what Ray really is and represents among us. We're not doing this because Ray has been here for 20 years; this just seemed like a good occasion to publicly recognize the ministry that Ray has been exercising among us all along and to publicly celebrate it.

When we first proposed changing Ray's

title to Minister of Music, someone asked, “Can we do that? Doesn’t that imply ordination or something?” Well, the confusion is understandable. We do sometimes refer to the ordained clergy as ministers, because they are ordained or set apart by the church for a particular kind of ministry—the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Order. But ministry in the broader sense is something all Christians are called to. That truth was one of the foundational truths recovered by Martin Luther and John Calvin and the other Protestant Reformers. It wasn’t a truth they discovered, but a truth they recovered. It was a truth that had always been true, but had often been obscured by the clericalism of the medieval church. The priesthood of all believers, as Luther put it, or the ministry of the laity, as we might put it today, is inherent in the very foundations of our faith, both in Judaism and in Christianity. Ministry, as St. Paul reminds the Christians in Corinth, is the calling of every member of the Church. *“Now there are varieties of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of ministries, but it is the same God who activates them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”* Again, in a later letter to the Corinthians, he says, *“God was in Christ, reconciling the world, and has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation. So then, we are ambassadors for Christ.”* Ministry, then, is the calling of every Christian, and the particular shape of that ministry depends on our own individual gifts and graces and our own commitment to use them for the common good.

One of those gifts and graces that lends itself to the common good is the gift of making music or helping others to make music. From the very earliest roots of our faith tradition, and in every faith tradition with which I’m familiar, music has always played a key role in the worship of the faith community. Music appears to be an essential part of our humanity, in fact. If

there’s a community anywhere in the world where people don’t make music, I’m not aware of it. And I doubt any of us would deny that music and spirituality are closely intertwined, whether we are making the music or listening to it. So, if music is so elementally essential to our being, how could it not be integral to our worship of that which we call God, that which represents the highest good, the Transcendent Other, who is the pole around which our very being orbits? Those who have such gifts for making music and the commitment to using those gifts to help others sing in harmony with one another and with God, are without question, ministers in the truest sense.

Our Old Testament lesson this morning gives us a glimpse of how integral a part of the worship of ancient Israel music was. As the Israelites prepared to dedicate the Temple that King Solomon built in Jerusalem, the place that would become their spiritual home, music was an essential part of that dedication ceremony.

The author tells us that the levitical singers stood before the assembly *“arrayed in fine linen* (you see, they had choir robes even then), *with cymbals, harps, and lyres, and stood east of the altar with one hundred twenty priests who were trumpeters. It was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord.”* Now, let me tell you, those singers must have been good to make themselves heard over 120 trumpets. That’s a pretty big brass section! Or more likely they were ram’s horn trumpets, which is even worse. I don’t think the reference to singing in unison refers to singing only one melody line as opposed to singing in parts; from what we know of ancient music, it’s doubtful in four-part or eight-part singing had been invented yet. Rather, it’s a reference to getting the singers coordinated with the trumpeters so that everyone was singing and playing the same thing at the same time, so that they didn’t sound like Charles Ives’s *Holiday Symphony*. That’s the one where

Ives recalls the experience of standing on the street during a parade of bands, where you can hear one band playing one song, and the next band coming up behind playing a different song in a different key at the same time. (I have to confess Charles Ives is one of my favorite composers.) But if you're going to get all 24 classes of levitical singers and all 120 priestly trumpeters making music together instead of having total chaos, you have to have a really good minister of music. Makes Ray's job look almost easy by comparison, doesn't it?

Each of those Levitical singers and each of those trumpeters had their own ministry of music; the point of the whole exercise was to enable the community to more fully offer their praise and thanksgiving to God. But someone had to have the additional ministry gifts for organizing, coordinating, rehearsing, and critical listening that were necessary to make the whole thing work.

So while we are celebrating Ray's special and wonderful ministry among us for the past twenty years, we're also celebrating the ministry of all those who have helped us to pray better through their own gifts of music. Those who sing in our various choirs and those who play in our bell choirs or other instruments, would not come, week after week to rehearsals, if they did not both love what music does for themselves and love offering that gift to others as a ministry, so that all of us are enriched and enabled to worship God more deeply and joyously and beautifully.

Fred Pratt Green, the author of the hymn we will sing as our closing hymn today puts it well,

*How often, making music, have we found  
A new dimension in the world of sound,  
as worship moved us to a more profound  
Alleluia!*

*Let every instrument be turned for praise!  
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!  
And may God give us faith to sing always  
Alleluia!*