

## “On Our Way Rejoicing”

Were it not for music, I would not be a minister. And I might not be a part of the life of any church. I was one of those people who needed to enter church via the back door, and to hang around on the fringes for a while before I really jumped into things. It was music that kept me connected long enough for faith to take hold in me.

In high school I was the president of my church youth group. I went to a huge high school, 5,000 students, 1220 in my graduating class, and I needed a small pond in which to feel like a big fish—or at least something bigger than plankton. Church gave me a community in which to play a role, doing unremarkable things that people remarked about. One of those things was singing in the choir.

My senior year in high school the church split over an Associate Minister who was very outspoken in opposition to the Viet Nam War and in support of the civil rights movement. As the token youth (“So, tell us, David, how do the young people feel about these things?”) I got so chewed up in the fight that I went away to college determined to have nothing to do with church. But I wanted to sing in the College Choir at Grinnell. And in order to do that, I had to sing for college chapel services two Sundays out of three.

Some Sundays, to tell you the truth, I was in no shape to follow what was going on in church, suffering as I was with the payback from Saturday night. But slowly, gradually, the message began to get through to me.

Music all on its own is a wonderful, soul-stirring, life-giving gift of God. We are defined by the music we like. The playlist of a person’s I-pod is something like a psychic fingerprint. Music touches deep emotions. It helps us express things way too scary for naked words. Music can gather a disparate group of people into a shared emotional state more quickly and reliably than anything else I know. So just by itself music is amazing.

But music in the context of faith is truly transforming. It helps us feel the meaning of great texts, teachings and truths. Through music we live with these things over and over until we know them by heart, which is to say they become a part of us. Things we can’t possibly grasp on a single reading once they have a tune attached become accessible to memory, just waiting for a teachable moment to come along. “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want.” “God is our refuge and strength.” “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.” “Precious Lord, take my hand.” As we hear and/or sing these things, our spirits resonate with these truths as an instrument resonates with its music.

Tunes help us remember great truths and recall them to mind through the hymnals of the heart we each have within us. Music is the ultimate community builder, because each time we sing together we are engaged in a negotiation. This may not be my favorite, but I will sing it with you because I know you’ll help me sing my heart when my favorite

comes around. If you don't have a great voice you can still sing in church and not really have to hear yourself if you don't want to.

Music can precipitate AHA moments. In college when those of us in the choir sang a choral AMEN at the end of the service I would feel as though I had been kissed on the lips and kicked in the butt at the same time; as though God were saying to me, "Hey, David! I love you! Now get out of here and do something useful!" I still believe, by the way, that that's how we ought to feel leaving worship.

Standing up here and watching you sing "May the Lord be always with you" at the end of a service, I can see tears glisten on the cheeks of people who may be going back to school or moving out of town or just moved by the sense of being in community. It's a precious thing.

Music has always been an important part of life at Plymouth. J. M. Chamberlain, Plymouth pastor from 1859-1865, writes about our early music life:

"It was true that we had a good choir, but few hymn-books in the pews. So [I] procured enough Sabbath hymn and tune-books to put one in each seat and supply the choir... It was then voted by the church to request the pastor to give out one familiar hymn and tune, to be sung by the congregation, each service, led by the choir. But the choir did not like the enforced union and re-inforcement, and so they dropped out, until in a few Sabbaths the choir seats were empty, and the pastor was compelled to lead the service of song from the pulpit. Then the congregation met on Monday evenings to rehearse, and they sang well, and much to the edification of Christian visitors, who often lingered to express their pleasure in the service of song. But the choir were kind, and soon returned to join as a part of the congregation, and after due probation, to lead the service. The experience of the young pastor was such that he would not wish to have another difference with his choir, except for the glory of God, never for his own."<sup>1</sup>

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth and Plymouth made the transition into a wonderful new building at eighth and Pleasant, the Plymouth choir was being hailed as the finest in the city, a magnet for musicians from the area. The choir numbered nearly a hundred. Their pictures were commonly in the newspaper, along with all their names, as they completed their season each spring.

There was a fine pipe organ in that eighth and Pleasant building. It was moved here to the forty-second and Ingersoll location when this building was erected in 1926, and that same organ continued to serve the church until a new instrument was installed in 1961. Carl tells me that that original organ was even larger than the present instrument.

In 1952 John Dexter came to Des Moines to join his colleague Dr. Charles Houser, who had come to be Plymouth's pastor in 1950. Houser and Dexter had worked together previously in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Dexter came here to become the first full time church musician in the City of Des Moines, and greatly expanded Plymouth's

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<sup>1</sup> Published in the record of the twenty-fifth Anniversary celebration of Plymouth church, as one of a number of letters from former Plymouth pastors.

offerings in music and the arts. He also started the Matins choir. But that's a subject for next week.

Today we are all enriched beyond description by the musicians and the music at Plymouth. Bell choirs, children's choirs, adult choirs, instrumentalists and soloists and the Saturday band: they add so much. And the singing congregation at times is the most inspirational element of all. Hearts and voices raised together in praise: it's no wonder that so many visions of heaven, images of what it means to be in the presence of God, involve music.

But let's return to Pastor Chamberlain for just a moment, and revisit his remarks about music in the earliest days of Plymouth Church. The conflict between the choir and the congregation over who should sing and how often and how well reminds us that the matter of music in the church can be intensely and painfully political and territorial. Like any great tool for ministry, music can become an end in itself. Churches are notorious for big-headed pastors with their "altar egos," magnificent buildings and the "edifice complexes" they inspire. But sometimes folks like me enter the church from the musical back door and never get beyond the vestibule. And sometimes we are enthralled with our own reflection as people who appreciate the finer things, whose cultural sensibilities set them apart from the unwashed masses with their little bible-y jingles. The word for this preoccupation with ourselves and things of our own creation is "idolatry," and goodness knows the church has been prone to it for as long as two or three have gathered together. It's small wonder we get hung up on music sometimes. We're never tempted to worship anything that isn't wonderful, at least in some aspect.

Music in the church is at its best when it is like the expression of gratitude on the part of the tenth leper in this morning's lesson. He returns to give thanks to Jesus because he just can't help himself. He doesn't care if it's the right thing to do, he doesn't care about going to the priests, he doesn't care what the rest will think. He only knows that his life has been transformed, he has been cleansed and made whole, and the only one who could do that is God, and the only thing to do when you are in the presence of God is worship.

I'll bet he sang.

Amen

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