

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, May 5, 2024

Siblings in Christ, I invite you to join me once again in the spirit of prayer. Let us pray. God of Mercy, you promise never to break your Covenant with us. Amid all the changing worlds of our generation, speak your Eternal Word that does not change. Then may we respond to your gracious promises with faithful and obedient lives, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Friends, hear these words from the 150th Psalm.

Praise the Lord. Praise God in his Sanctuary.
Praise God in the mighty firmament.
Praise God for all his mighty deeds.
Praise the Lord according to God's surpassing greatness. Praise God with trumpet sound.
Praise the Lord with lute and with harp.
Praise God with tambourine and dance.
Praise God with strings and pipes.
Praise the Lord with clanging cymbals.
Praise God with loud clashing cymbals.
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

These are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Jim Williams was a mailman. He was a US Postal Service worker, delivered mail all week long, and then was a faithful member of John Knox Presbyterian Church in Greenville, where I grew up. He saw a need that was unfulfilled in our church. We had a ton of young people, and no one to direct our youth ministries, and so Jim volunteered to be our youth director. He'd work all week, and then he'd show up on Wednesday evenings and lead us in Bible study, show up on Sunday mornings and help facilitate our Sunday school, and then show up on Sunday evenings and lead us in youth group. He'd also take us on a number of different trips. Our church in the hundred years of its existence had never engaged in international travel before—International partnership trips, and he was the first one to help facilitate that for our church. He also got us involved in a whole bunch of other partnership opportunities and ministries across our nation. That meant that we spent a lot of time in a 15 passenger Ford van with Jim Williams. Jim Williams only had one rule, “If I am driving,” he said, “I control the music.” Y'all probably remember, or some of y'all from a certain age will remember, these kinds of vinyl um disc uh CD disc holders, right, that you would attach to your sun visor. Okay, and many of y'all, I'm sure, since you have diverse musical likes, you would fill up those different slots with different types of music, right, so that on a long road trip, you might be able to experience a little bit of your full catalog of music. Not Jim Williams. Jim Williams had 12 Styx CDs in his CD holder. (Yeah, woo; we get a woo in the...yeah.) Many of y'all have no idea who Styx is. It's a band. You don't actually need to know who they are, but he loved Styx, and so, no matter how long the journey was, whether it was 30 minutes or 10 hours, Jim would be driving, and we would be listening to Styx. And we weren't actually allowed at that time to have headphones or anything like that, so we had to be locked in. For those who are unaware, Styx has a...a greatest hits album that is 16 songs long. We can all agree that the producer of that album was being liberal in

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the definition of greatest hits, okay? There are probably four: Renegade, Come Sail Away, Mr Robato, Too Much Time On My Hands. Come Sail Away actually came on the radio this week while I was working out, and it took me back to that 15 passenger van on a summer trip to the Appalachian service project location just outside of Lexington, Kentucky. I remember being seated in the middle seat because I was the youngest, so I didn't get a window. I had Drew Baird on one side of me, um Mary Crabtree on the other side of me. They were the coolest two people I'd ever met in my entire life, right? We traveled for about 8 and 1 half hours listening to Styx the whole way.

Music has this ability to connect us to a certain time and space and people that few other things can connect us with. Music can connect us, it can excite us, it can help us express our feelings like almost nothing else can. I'm under no illusion that you will remember what I say or what any of the other preachers have to say from this pulpit on a week to week basis. Maybe you will...maybe there'll be some nuggets that you carry with you, but I believe fully that there will be songs that we have lifted in this holy space that will never leave you. Most of the time, in fact, music can do more than the spoken word. Sometimes it turns out the best sermons are sung. Music is an integral part, then, of our worship experience. Even before Christ the Psalms were sung to God in praise and lament. The Psalms were sung before mere words, because mere words would not do. Singing was required to express the fullness of what it meant to cry out to God in need and to praise God as best we could. The psalmist in Psalm 150 reminds us that the chief end of each of us and indeed all of creation is to praise the Lord in all places and in all times, and one of the best ways that we do that is with music, with song. The psalmist says, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." Our earliest Christian worship is described by Paul in 1 Corinthians this way. "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation." The first thing that Paul lists—a hymn. Elsewhere in 1 Corinthians Paul writes that we should sing praise to God in spirit, but we should also sing with our minds. That's interesting, because it turns out that the hymns are to appeal to the spirit but to also speak to our minds. They should have serious intellectual content. Hymns should be both singable and have depth. They should be rooted in the truest parts of our identity as followers of the way. Think of all the places in the Bible where singing was the only appropriate response of God's people. The people brought the Ark of the Covenant into the temple, and what did they do? They raised music and songs, and they danced. Mary is visited by the Angel Gabriel with the incredible news that she will bear the Son of God, and her response is to sing the Magnificat. What words do you imagine would have sufficed at receiving that glorious news? Only song, it turns out. What is his response when Zachariah learns that his wife will bear John the Baptist as their son? To sing. Songs are sometimes the only reasonable response to God's glory. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the church sang Psalms almost exclusively for a couple centuries. We still sing Psalms to this day, but slowly, over time, trusted hymn writers began to put words to this life of faith and to the glory of God for us to sing together in worship. The hymns have changed over time as the church has changed. Our music has evolved as it needs to, but our music should always reflect the diversity and the history of the church universal. One of the things that I love about coming to worship here each week, having the privilege of sitting up front here getting to look out at y'all, is to see all the diversity of voices

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that are joined together when we sing a hymn communally. Well most of us sing. Some of us hold hymnals and keep our mouths closed. Some of us don't raise a song of praise to God, but we do stand in spirit, to stand alongside those who lift their voices in praise. I wonder if on this music appreciation Sunday, those who are afraid to sing hymns too loudly because they're worried about those in front of them in the pews um might feel an invitation to be softened to your own, what you might see as inability to hold a tune, to be open to what it means to glorify God by raising our voices. Remember that the only, the only object of our worship is the Lord. The only ears who we hope to gladden with our songs are God's. The songs that we sing together, they bind us together one generation to the next. We lift our voices and we honor God and we join with every person who has sung before in this beautiful space and as people who follow in the way of Christ. Therefore our worship contains many things: prayer and proclamation and confession and affirmation, but it is the songs that bind us. Alice Parker has been a hero in the universe of choral music as a composer and a conductor and a teacher for almost 90 years. She began as a young woman studying and conducting with Robert Shaw at Juilliard and collaborating with him on arrangements of folk songs and spirituals and hymns that are still performed around the world today. She says that she recognized the universal connecting power of song through motherhood. Of that, she says, "I realized as a mother holding my infant daughter that there was not a song I could sing to her in which she would not delight. Without the ability to comprehend any of the words that I sang, she knew that it was good." I thought about that this week when an old friend of mine talked about singing to her children. She said, "When my children were infants, and even as they've gotten older, I sing to them. I don't worry much about how I sound. When they were young, they couldn't even understand if I was holding a note or not. And now they laugh and smile when I miss one. When I was young and they were young, I was just so filled with love for them that it seemed that singing was the only appropriate response." I think that's what God wants from us—that our love for Christ would be so great that it might spill over into song, that we might together say that the spoken word is not enough, that indeed we must put notes to the words that we have to proclaim. So this day, may we sing every hymn, unworried about how we sound, but with exuberance and with joy rooted in our love for God. May we, as the psalmist calls us, may we sing to the Lord a new song. May we sing praises to our God above.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.