

C.S. Lewis is one of my favorite writers – *Mere Christianity, The Chronicles of Narnia, The Weight of Glory, Surprised by Joy*, and the list goes on.

He was converted late in his life to the Christian faith but was prolific in his writings, with a God-given gift to bring some difficult doctrines down to earth.

He had some wonderful insights into religion, but one thing he did not like about the Christian faith was its singing!

When asked why, he gave several reasons: one, he said, the music was often unsingable; two, the words were often incomprehensible; and finally, this is where he stops preaching and goes to meddling, he says that the singers in the congregation were often incoherent!

Now, from my non-musical point of view, there are tunes that seem to defy singing or understanding, and I confess that I am chief among singers to be considered incoherent!

But I have been called to preach, not sing! Even so, I truly and most sincerely disagree with the great C.S. Lewis about congregational singing!

Christians have been singing as long as there have been churches – this letter from Paul talks about the hymns and spiritual songs, and our ancestors in the faith, the people of Israel, here in Chronicles is David singing praises and verses of this song are found in a variety of psalms: 105 and 95, 103, 111, 24, 46, and several others.

Singing has been, is, and always will be a part of our worship and discipleship.

And First Presbyterian Church has been blessed with great talent with John Coble and all those who have served as Directors of Music throughout its rich history.

And, of course, all the wonderful children and youth and adults who have accepted God’s call to sing in our choirs and lead us in our ministries of music.

So, on this day that we honor our choirs, let us consider our singing.

I think there are at least two reasons for us Christians to sing. First, songs help us to express what we believe.

R.J. Phillips, former Commander of the Chaplain Corps of the U.S. Navy gave me the topic for this sermon when he said, “If you can’t sing it, you don’t have to believe it.”

In other words, every really important teaching of the faith can be expressed in song. And if a certain teaching cannot be sung in some meaningful way, then I have to say it is probably not important.

You can read a 300-page book on the doctrine of the Trinity, but the essence of this doctrine is sung in the great hymn: “*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity.*”

You can listen to a sermon on the Holy Spirit or go through a 10-week Bible Study, but the best illustration is singing, “*Love divine, all love excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down.*”

Or if you are really ambitious, take a year or so to research all the theories on the doctrine of the Atonement, or you can sing one verse of “Beneath the Cross of Jesus”: “*Upon the cross of Jesus mine eye at times can see the very dying form of One who suffered there for me; and from my stricken heart with tears two wonders I confess, the wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.*”

Songs help us express what we believe.

Even that doctrine so difficult but so important to Presbyterians: PREDESTINATION! I would sing, “*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*”

The hymns we sing should express the ‘meat and potatoes of our faith’ – hymns help us express what we believe, and, secondly, singing together helps us express what we feel about what we believe.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8, that “the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

I believe that what happens in our songs to God is they are vocal prayers in which we can express feelings that otherwise may be too deep for words: *“O, for a thousand tongues to sing my dear Redeemer’s praise.”*

Martin Luther said that the “devil hates gaiety...He can sneer, but he cannot sing.”

In our songs, in our music, in our singing, you have permission to feel the full range of what you believe – you can express your deepest longings, your greatest joys in ways that plain, spoken words cannot.

That’s the delight of that old movie, *Sister Act*...

The story is that of a dying church brought back to life because of songs and music – yes, worldly songs, but worldly songs that are redeemed, converted, and transformed into the spirit of David’s passion for praise, into the feelings of Peter and Paul about the lordship of Jesus: “I will follow him...he is my destiny.”

What happens in this movie is what music in the church is all about – the music and the singing get inside of us – us worldly people who are redeemed, converted, and transformed – a passion for praise that gets us closer to God – that’s what singing in the church should be all about.

We’re in good company when we sing. There were times when the army of Israel went into battle singing. Of course, David and his psalms.

On the night after finishing his last supper with his disciples, they sang a hymn before leaving for the garden of Gethsemane.

In the book of Revelation, we’re given a glimpse of heaven with sound, and it’s not the sound of lectures or sermons or committee reports – the sound of heaven, the sound that surrounds the throne of God and echoes throughout eternity is the sound of God’s people singing.

And worshipping in the here and now is our rehearsal time.

Two old American folk hymns sum it up best, I think: *“Come thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing thy grace; Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise. Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues above; Praise the mount! I’m fixed upon it, Mount of God’s unchanging love.”*

And the last verse of “What Wondrous Love Is This”:
“And when from death I’m free, I’ll sing on, I’ll sing on...And from death I’m free, I’ll sing on and joyful be; And through eternity I’ll sing on, I’ll sing on.”

Now I know that no matter how great we sound in the shower, most of us will never be asked to sing with the Metropolitan Opera – But that doesn’t matter when we sing for our faith.

Listen to these words from Alden Solovy in his poem “Sing Out”.

*When you feel the light of holiness,
The radiance of love,
The shimmering of glory,
The luminous glow of spirit...*

*When you inhale wonder
And exhale awe...*

*When mystery and majesty flow
Through your pulsing veins...*

*When God’s whisper becomes a thundering
Blast of the shofar...*

*When your soul remembers its
Place in the heavens...*

*Sing out!
Sing out your joy.
Sing out your praise.*

*When you feel the light of Torah
The radiance of the commandments,
The shimmering of prayer,
The luminous glow of loving-kindness...*

*Sing out!
Sing out to God.
Your voice will join the chorus of angels,
And your heart will know
The secret of eternity.*

We have been created to sing, to “sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day!”

TO GOD BE THE GLORY!