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First Presbyterian Church  
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Acts 16:16-34

### “Thoughts and Prayers: Prayer as Art, Dancing, and Music”

Last week I began a new sermon series titled “Thoughts and Prayers”. The idea is to explore and lift up the many ways our own Book of Common Worship speaks of prayer, such as prayer as protest and public witness, which I preached about last week, or prayer as acts of compassion, which I’ll talk about next week. Today I’m lifting up prayer as art, dancing, and music – well, specifically prayer as singing – since that’s what we’re all most familiar with because every week in worship we sing.

The saying “To sing is to pray twice” is often attributed to St. Augustine, but just as I’ve seen different versions of the quote, I’ve also seen it variously attributed to Martin Luther or sources. Whoever said it first, the point is that music can be a form of prayer.

John Calvin also believed that congregational song is a type of prayer, though he would have likely disapproved of using instruments to accompany the singing. Calvin wrote that music “has a secret and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another.” But he was wary of songs that might bend our hearts toward sin. It’s rumored that the Methodist John Wesley, fearing the same, took to rewriting popular drinking songs sung in the local pubs, with lyrics that instead sung of the grace and love of Jesus.

The Book of Order in a section titled “Music as Prayer” says:

“Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer. Song unites the faithful in common prayer wherever they gather for worship whether in church, home, or other special place.” (W-2.1003).

Fifteen times the Old Testament tells us to “sing to the Lord.” In fact, sung praise seems to be the Bible’s favorite form of prayer, because the Bible instructs us to sing to the Lord, come into God’s presence with singing, make melody to the Lord, and enter God’s courts in song, 242 times in the Old Testament alone. Add the 12 New Testament citations, and you get a pretty good picture of the importance of

song to God. In fact, the book of Revelation depicts heaven as always filled with songs of praise to the saints, and when we join our voices with them we add to their continuing song. Friends, we sing because singing is what the people of God do in God's presence. Song is the gift God has given us to unite our hearts and heads in praise.

Today you heard the little known story of Paul and Silas singing in jail, which united the hearts and heads of their fellow prisoners and even their jailer. It's a story that intrigues me. What do you think they were singing, sitting there in the dark with their feet in chains? What song was so powerful as to cause an earthquake and a jailer to convert on the spot? That must have been one powerful song.

How they happened to be in that jail is also interesting. Paul and Silas, who had come to believe Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah, had traveled from Palestine to Philippi, a thriving city on the coast of Macedonia. They were there because they believed God wanted them to be there, to tell the story of Jesus, how he had taught and healed, was arrested, tortured, and executed, how he had been resurrected, and how the world was now a new place because of that.

In Philippi there was a girl, a slave girl actually, who everybody knew because she was so different, so peculiar. Everyone said she had an evil spirit, a demon because she behaved oddly and said outrageous things. In fact, she was so amusing that her owners came up with the idea to sell her predictions for profit. Will Willimon said they rented her out as entertainment for business conventions, set up a fortune-telling and palm-reading booth. She was earning a lot of money for her owners, and it was a very happy arrangement until Paul and Silas came along.

The girl was fascinated with them: started to follow them around and shout things about them, some controversial things. "These men are slaves of the Most High God!", she cried. It was annoying, a real problem. Everywhere they went, there she was, interrupting and shouting. Until finally, one day, Paul had had enough and shouted back, "Stop it! In the name of Jesus Christ, whoever you are, come out and go away." And the stunned girl stopped babbling and shouting and was quiet. Her demon was gone. Whatever was possessing her, driving her,

enslaving her, was gone. And so also was her bizarre behavior and her entertainment value. The demon was gone, and so was her owner's profit.

This makes her owners angry, so they drag Paul and Silas to the marketplace, to the magistrate. "These men are disturbing our city: besides they are Jews, not Macedonians. They're outsiders, outside agitators." Notice they're not above invoking a little anti-Semitism and patriotism: "They aren't our people; and they're advocating customs that are not ours." The crowd is now whipped into a fury and starts to attack Paul and Silas, and the magistrate orders them beaten and thrown in jail. And that is how they came to be singing hymns in the dark at midnight. But then . . .

There was an earthquake so severe that the chains around their ankles were dislodged from the wall and the doors were knocked off their hinges. The jailer hurried to the jail to check the damage and discovered about the worst thing that can happen to a warden: a major jail break, prisoners all free, running loose. He's so distraught and dismayed he is about to fall on his own sword. But here comes another voice in the dark. It's Paul again: "Hold on. Don't do it. We're still here. We haven't gone anywhere." And the jailer, clearly shaken, asks Paul and Silas what they are all about, why they haven't run away. And the result is that he, the jailer and all his family, are baptized, and he invites Paul and Silas into his home, and they all sit down and have a late night dinner, and they eat and drink and laugh and talk until the wee hours. I bet there was singing, too.

Now for all the stories in the Bible about music, song, and singing. For all the stories or Psalms I could have chosen, the reason I chose this was one is because it shows us the power that singing has. I mean, Paul and Silas could have chosen to bow their heads in silent prayer, or even to lead the people in a spoken prayer. But they didn't. They chose to sing, to sing their prayer – and in so doing they sung a defiant prayer, a prayer filled with hope. A prayer that harkened back to the words of Jesus and the prophet Isaiah: a prayer about bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free.

In choosing this story about Paul and Silas, I also can't help but think about a similar, contemporary story, about the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin, who was arrested and jailed for trespassing in the US Capitol when protesting the Vietnam

War. Coffin's fellow demonstrators, pretty religious folk, according to Coffin, remember that during the night, when they were uneasy, even depressed, they suddenly heard someone singing. And it was Coffin. He started to sing "The Messiah". And quite a few people joined in. It was a good night, Coffin said in a 2004 interview with Bill Moyers.

Moyers asked Coffin, "What is it that enables a man to sing in prison?"

Coffin replied: "Well. In my case music, after God, has been my chief source of solace. Song is an expression of hope. And hope is something that is experienced with a kind of psychological certitude, rather than intellectual certainty.

It's trusting that things all will be well when the day is done. Hope needs to be understood as a reflection of the state of your soul, not as reflection of the circumstances that surround your days. Hope is about keeping the faith despite the evidence so that the evidence has a chance of changing.

Hope criticizes what is . . . Hope resists, hopelessness adapts. Hope arouses, as nothing else can, a passion for the possible!

There never was a night or a problem that could defeat sunrise or hope!"

Paul, Silas, the prisoners, and even their jailer, could have allowed despair to defeat them. But instead they joined their voices in song, singing their prayer, which shook the very foundations of the earth. They filled the void with music and hope. And the whole enterprise of exploitation and intimidation and discrimination fell to the ground in the medley of hope they sang because of the God who taught them those songs and who always sets us free.

Music works like this. It tunnels us out of whatever jail we are in.

When enslaved people in this country would hear the song Swing Low Sweet Chariot, it was not only a beautiful song but the cue that they needed to be ready to flee because a band of angels from the Underground Railroad was ready for them.

When marchers in the Civil Rights Movement joined arms and sang We Shall Overcome or other freedom songs, they created a stark moral difference between their song and the water hoses that had been turned on them. John Lewis said, "if

it hadn't been for music, the Civil Rights Movement would have been a bird without wings."

When Nelson Mandela was in prison, he said, "You can sing your way out of pain and survive." He described how opponents and supporters of apartheid made music together in jail and there they forged the bonds that eventually took the whole apartheid system down.

And last week at a concert, U2 paid tribute to those killed by Gaza militants at a [music festival](#) in Southern Israel.

"In the light of what's happened in Israel and Gaza, a song about non-violence seems somewhat ridiculous, even laughable, but our prayers have always been for peace and for non-violence," [Bono told the Las Vegas audience](#). "But our hearts and our anger, you know where that's pointed. So sing with us... and those beautiful kids at that music festival."

"Early morning, October 7th," he sang. "The sun is rising in the desert sky / Stars of David, they took your life / But they could not take your pride."

Friends, it's important to remember that Paul and Silas's singing didn't carry them into more violence, or more retaliation, but to dinner at the jailer's house. It was a deeper conversion that freed them all. When we sing God's refrain, we also refrain from furthering any patterns of abuse and hatred. We sing our way into a new way of being.

As the old hymn sings:

My life flows on in endless song;  
Above earth's lamentation,  
I catch the sweet†, tho' far-off hymn  
That hails a new creation;  
Thro' all the tumult and the strife  
I hear the music ringing;  
It finds an echo in my soul—  
How can I keep from singing?

What tho' my joys and comforts die?  
The Lord my Saviour liveth;  
What tho' the darkness gather round?  
Songs in the night he giveth.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm  
While to that refuge clinging;  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,  
How can I keep from singing?

I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin;  
I see the blue above it;  
And day by day this pathway smooths,  
Since first I learned to love it,  
The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,  
A fountain ever springing;  
All things are mine since I am his—  
How can I keep from singing?

And later, a 4th verse was added by folk musicians in the mid-20th century, which seems appropriate for today:

When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,  
And hear their death-knell ringing,  
When friends rejoice both far and near,  
How can I keep from singing?  
In prison cell and dungeon vile,  
Our thoughts to them go winging;  
When friends by shame are undefiled,  
How can I keep from singing?

Amen.