

“Wisdom from the Heart”
Psalm 100
Farewell Sunday for Jill Hunt
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Christine Chakoian
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

It is fitting on this occasion - as we celebrate Jill Hunt's 20 years of service here, and honor her retirement - that we turn once more to the Psalms as a source of our wisdom. The book of Psalms is a collection of songs, an entire book of the Bible that urges us to sing our faith. I've chosen for our text today Psalm 100: listen as it urges us to enter God's presence with singing, with thanksgiving, with praise.

Psalm 100:

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.
Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.
For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations. (*This is the Wd of the Ld*)

As many of you know, I've been away for the last three weeks in Granville, Ohio, to be with my twin sister, Karen, as she undergoes treatment for cancer. It was precious to be with her and her son, and to be able to do useful little things as she plows through this difficult time. The good news is that she's almost done with her treatments. The bad news is that the next month will be the worst, as the cumulative effects of chemo and radiation continue to do their toxic work in her body. It was, to put it mildly, hard to leave. I'm comforted in knowing that our older brothers will take turns being with her in the next few weeks.

I need to say that my time with Karen has not been just on the “giving” end. I've received so much support and prayer from all of you, and it has been deeply nourishing. I've received tremendous back-up from my colleagues, which has reassured me of the really sturdy foundation we have here. I've received lots of TLC from Karen's church in Granville, too, where she's the pastor. My first Sunday there, I preached, which both wiggled them out and reassured them, since we are so identical. Since she's been out of worship for a couple of months because of exhaustion and her depleted immune system, in retrospect, I could have read the phone book and they would have been glad to hear “her” voice. And, as you may have noticed, I'm no longer an ersatz redhead, because I want to be in solidarity with Karen and *really* look like her again. Apparently, I do, since all over Granville when people asked how “I” was, I had to start by saying, “I'm fine, but I'm not Karen.”

Since I have received so much from my time away, I want you to be on the receiving end as well. So today, as we look again at wisdom from the Psalms – and Psalm 100's urging for us to “come into God's presence with singing, and God's courts with praise” - I'll start by sharing a reflection about worship Karen wrote for her Caring Bridge site: “Early on,” she writes,

“I wondered what [this time of treatment] would be like for my psyche as well as soma (body), and for my pneuma (spirit) even more. I wondered if I would find myself turning to God in prayer more, or less; if I would be drawn to certain passages of scripture; and what would feed me spiritually in the absence of my usual patterns. I'm no poster-child, that's for sure. I may have more tools at my disposal after years of ministry but that doesn't mean I am inclined to use them when needed. I can be as spiritually lazy as the next poor soul.

“So here's what I've discovered: I really, *really* miss worship. I find myself unmoored without it. It

isn't *parts* of worship I miss, it's the whole. I miss being with a body of people who choose to focus body, mind and spirit on God, intentionally, collectively, purposefully, humbly. I miss what happens in those sacred moments when we, together, are moved into a plane of being not of our own making. I miss the quiet, deep listening. I miss the feeling of being renewed and refreshed, with my identity reaffirmed and reawakened. I miss being connected to Something and Someone greater than myself.

“Left to its own devices my 'self' can quickly become bored and boring, critical and self-critical, whiny, and filled with self-pity. I know I have every right to be sad, angry, scared - whatever feelings may come. That's different than the interpretation I put around the feelings. ... It's harder to shut up the voices in my head without the community of faith I rely on. I need wise, solid, loving, faithful people to point me back to the God who is tender, compassionate, merciful, and abounding in steadfast love.

“Honestly, it's harder to pray without the weekly discipline of worship. The rhythm of praise is upended. Without Sabbath, all the days run together as either 'treatment' or 'not-treatment.' There is no center but my experience, when I need most a Center that will hold.

“I am finding my way... through breath-prayer, journaling, and conversations with beloved family and friends. I know God is with me and the path will continue to emerge as I walk it. But you know what?

“I miss the communion of saints.”ⁱ

The centrality of worship with the communion of saints: it's easy to dismiss it. Worship is time-consuming. Worship can be boring (especially sermons that drone on). Worship can intrude on other family activities like soccer or golf or walks on the beach. And yet, what Karen is discovering is this: Worship is so much more than an intellectual exercise. Worship shapes us in indelible ways. It reminds us who – and whose – we are. Worship plunks us down in the middle of a community whether or not we know we need it. Worship makes us available to others whose searching and sorrow may not be visible to human eyes. It keeps us centered. Worship, in other words, is not just about our heads. It's about our spirits, our wills, our bodies, our *hearts*.

How does it happen? No one knows for sure, but we have a few ideas. Psalm 100 is a starting place, outlining the cause-and-effect of our worship together. I encourage you to look at the Scripture in your bulletin again so you can see the connections I'm describing:

- Notice that it's *when* we “make a joyful noise to the Lord” - *then* we “know that the Lord is God; it is he that made us, and we are his.”
- And *when* we “come into God's presence with singing,” *then* we come to trust that “we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.”
- And *when* we “enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise,” *then* we know that “the Lord is good.”
- And *when* we “give thanks to him and bless his name,” *then* we come to trust that “God's steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

There is cause-and-effect in worship. Our actions of joyful noise of singing and praise and thanksgiving - they open our hearts. They open our hearts to knowing God's presence, to feeling God's tender care for us, to trusting the unshakable goodness of the Lord, to leaning on the steadfast love of God that endures forever. Our participation opens us to the deep spiritual wisdom God longs for us to have. That's why it's so crucial that, as a congregation, you're not the “audience.” You can't “get” this wisdom of worship if you're just watching. Or to use another metaphor, worship isn't a spectator sport. We're all on the team together, and we all need to play our part.

So first, our participation matters. And second, *what* we're participating in matters very much too. The *content* of our worship - the *nature* of our time together – has a profound effect on our experience of God. And Christians

have no end of options for worship, do we? How many of you have been to a Quaker meeting filled with silence? A Willow-Creek-style, huge praise service? An Eastern Orthodox chanted, incense-filled service? A charismatic, speaking-in-tongues service? The options for expressing our faith together are endless.

But of all the different ways that we worship, there is one element in it that has the most profound impact: music. It's not hyperbole to say that the most crucial trigger for our hearts to be opened is the way *music* that invites us in. It's why people care so much about the kind of music in worship – pipe organ or electric guitars, classical or contemporary, mysterious chants or Appalachian folk music, Gospel or bagpipes. Honestly, preachers come and go, and we can agree or disagree with what they have to say. But the music in worship? It gets inside of us in ways that words alone can never touch.

It's subtle, but it's very, very powerful. The organ prelude provides the foundational “heartbeat” for the whole service, setting the underlying mood and emotional tone. The organist's tempo of the hymns, their triumphant chords or quiet minor-key, it pulls our hearts to soar or draws us into quiet. The shift to piano, sometimes with guitars or drums invites our hearts to a comfortable place where we can be ourselves. The children's choirs melt our hearts and lift us in joy. The sanctuary choir steadies us, offering their own voices to sing what we feel. The bells delight in their lightness, and watching them play reminds us how essential each note is, how essential each of *us* is in our life's praise. And then there are the hymns. Some we love, some we roll our eyes at, some we stumble over, some we weep whenever we sing them. And subtly, bit by bit, the hymns embed their message in our heart and soul, until, long after we forget sermons and Bible studies and books we've read, we remember hymns “by heart.” This is no accident. Because music carries our faith in a way words alone never can. Indeed, if you ever go to a residence for people with dementia, you may notice a remarkable thing. They may not track who you are; they will not be able to remember what happened even yesterday. But start singing hymns? Their eyes will light up, their voices will rise, and they will sing every word by memory ... they will sing their faith *by heart*.

I began on a very personal note, and I want to end on a personal note too. Jill Hunt, I will miss you very much. Of all of the organists I have ever served alongside, you, most of all, “get it” about worship. You are less concerned with a perfect “performance” than with helping our singers and bell-ringers bring *their* best as an offering to God. You are less wedded to your “favorites” than with insuring that the whole church worships in ways that might articulate *their* faith, sometimes in ways they did not even know they needed. You are less fussy about this style or that, and more concerned with how our music will open our hearts to the real, right now, right here, trustworthy presence of God. Honestly, Jill, you are such a humble servant. It really doesn't surprise me that “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” is one of your favorite anthems. You have indeed offered your soul, your life, your all in service to the Lord. We will miss you in this communion of saints, where you have set the heartbeat of worship for twenty years.

And here is our promise to you, Jill: we will continue to “make a joyful noise to the Lord.” We will continue to “worship the Lord with gladness.” We will continue to “come into God's presence with singing.” We will continue to “enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.” And as we do, we trust that we will continue to know more and more the loving, trustworthy love of God, who calls us his people, the sheep of his pasture. And in the years ahead, we pray that you will also know that “the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Amen.

¹<http://www.caringbridge.org/visit/karenchakoian/journal/view/id/55ad23b7ab28b96446fc9b6f>, July 20, 2015.