

Pentecost 13, Proper 17
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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The Song of God

I have long loved music. My mother was musical, my siblings are musical, and I am musical. Singing together has something heavenly about it, as reflected in the Honduran story of why the frog is short and squat.

Apparently, one day an angel came down from heaven and was listening to the birds sing. He was so taken by their beauty, that he told God the Father about it, who promptly came down to listen, too. The result was an invitation to the birds to come to heaven to present a concert before the heavenly throne! Everybody who wore feathers was absolutely enthralled with the prospects of going to sing for God.

Other animals congratulated them, but one animal was jealous, and that was the frog. You see, every time he opened his mouth to sing all he got was a croak. Everyone thought it was ugly. But he REALLY wanted to see the pearly gates and he wanted to hear the angels, and he wanted to walk the streets of gold! "Please, please, take me with you," he pleaded to the birds.

Well the birds replied, "How are you going to get there? We're going to fly there, but you have no wings."

"No problem," answered the frog. "I will bring a stout stick, and if two of you can hold the stick in your beaks crosswise, I will hold on and you can take me with you."

"But you must promise to be silent! We cannot have your ugly croaking ruining our concert for God."

"Cross my heart, hope to die, I will be silent," answered the frog. And so, they consented.

The day came and the birds assembled, and the frog gathered with them. He had a stout stick and two strong fliers each took an end. He took hold of the middle, and up they went, all the way to heaven. When he got there, he was amazed. It was grander and more beautiful than he ever imagined. The streets of gold, the mansions, the angels' song, he was overwhelmed, but he remembered his promise and did not open his mouth. Finally, the time came for the concert, and everyone gathered in the great celestial hall. The birds began to sing, and they sang their best. They sang their hearts out for gratitude to God for the beautiful earth on which they lived, for the color of their feathers, and for the songs they could sing. They sang of beauty and pain, glory and wonder and sorrow and despair. They sang of love and the power of love. It was absolutely beautiful, better than any of their rehearsals.

And there sat the frog in the corner, taking it all in and being overwhelmed by it all, such that he just couldn't help himself. "Croak!"

The concert stopped! A hush fell on the room. Angrily, the leader of the birds said, "You promised not to say anything, and now you have ruined our concert! Off with you!" and he kicked the poor frog out of heaven, where he came tumbling down to earth and hit with a great splat! And that's why a frog is short and squat!

There IS something heavenly about music. Cute stories aside, music is a profound experience. It has been part of the human experience since the beginning of our race. There are stories from around the world about how God sings creation into being, as if life itself is a great song. Our Hindu siblings talk about *Om* being the primordial sound. Vibration is matter in predictable motion. Atoms vibrate, molecules vibrate, stars and galaxies vibrate, one could say that sound goes to the core of what it means to exist. To speak of the songs of the stars is not fantasy.

It is no wonder, then, that music figures so highly in human worship. Though the use of musical instruments is debated among some Christian circles, I know of none that does not sing. Though he is probably erroneously credited with saying it, the phrase rings true: "He who sings, prays twice." St. Gregory's version is, "He prays twice who sings his prayer, " and some variations are a bit more selective: "He who sings well prays twice!"

All that aside, if it can at all be quantified, I have heard it said that music comprises 40% of a worshipper's experience on Sunday morning. For that reason, we have continued to sing at St. Paul's and Resurrección, albeit through masks, and not as a choir.

When we sing together lots of things happen. We join vibrations, either in unison or harmony. We join in words, phrasing our sung prayer in synchrony with one another. We lose ourselves into the music—into the sung moment, into the message and the medium in tandem, finding ourselves instead standing in the presence of God together as a singing body.

And here is the spiritual lesson: Truly singing is an act of surrender to beauty that comes from God. It is an act of humility, the truthful, honest offering of oneself with no pretense. It is worship. In the Gospel lesson for today Jesus tells the disciples plainly that he will suffer and die and in three days rise again. Overcome with shock and surprise, Peter, the spokesperson for them all, takes him to task. "This can never be, Lord!!"

But Jesus rebukes him. "The Son of Man will go as it is written, " and then he repeats a lesson that we hear in many different ways throughout the Gospels: "He who saves his life will lose it, and he who loses his life will find it." When it comes to music it can be said like this:

"The one who sings from the heart in humble surrender to the song truly sings, but the one who sings to be noticed only produces discord."

Equally, the one who gives to help out gives to God, but the one who gives to be known as a generous person helps in spite of themselves. The one who teaches to help people learn and grow teaches from the heart of God, but the one who teaches to be known as a great and intelligent person only makes a fool of themselves. The one who cleans the bathrooms to make them safe for people cleans the heavenly bathrooms, but the one who does it to be known as a great servant soils their own work. Music is a metaphor for prayer. The one who prays humbly and openly from the heart will always be heard, but the one who prays to be seen as a religious and pious person is uselessly using up the air.

This morning we say goodbye to someone who has helped us sing. She has done it in English and Spanish. She has done it for 19 years, since 2001. She has done it humbly, with love and from the heart. Her leadership in music has lifted us all up, helped us all stand before God and sing from our own hearts, has helped us form into a body who sings praises together, with one voice and one heart, has taught us, loved us and served us.

Now she is called to sing in another concert, another place. These things happen, and we are sad, but we are comforted by two things. She would say the first thing immediately. The point is the song, the worship, being lifted up together, not the one who leads or even the one who sings. She has walked with us, and we are grateful, but the song goes on. And the second is that, near or far, here or there, it is still the same song. The same God who sang creation into being, the same Jesus whose loving gift on the cross has inspired songs across the ages and the globe, the same Church gathered in Jesus' name, and the same songs, in many languages, lifting up the one human song of worship to God.

We send her with a song in her heart—the song of our love and gratitude for having sung with us, worshipped with us, and loved us. Pam, you have lifted us to heaven, and we do not forget. In our prayers and in our singing, we will continue to lift you to heaven as well.

Go, sing your song and ours, you go with our blessing, and when you return, come sing with us again!

Meditation Questions:

1. How has music blessed you?
2. What is it in your life that lifts you beyond yourself into the presence of God?
3. How has that influenced your relationships with others?