

Pentecost 6 –July 4, 2021- Jackson at Holy Spirit
Text: Hymns
Theme: Worship Series 6 “Expressions of Faith”

As we continue the sermon series on worship, we have stood on the mountain top of the first peak and heard the Lord God Almighty speak to us through the Old Testament reading, the Epistle and the Gospel. We have heard the pastor’s proclamation based on God’s Word. Now we begin descending the mountain. As we descend, we sing, so, today we’re going to talk about the hymns. It is interesting that this day happens to have fallen on Independence Day when one of the things Mary and I were concerned about was music. It is seldom that the actual day falls on a Sunday and we wanted to celebrate with patriotic songs but of course there really are not very many patriotic songs that are also for worship so Mary recruited the Golden Light Singers to give us a patriotic concert between services. Music is that important for us. All of the really deep things we believe are best expressed in music.

That is why one of the most vital parts of our worship is music. Luther said that he held music in highest esteem second only to theology itself. In our prayer of the day today, we prayed,

“Grant us the fullness of Your grace that we may be called to repentance and made partakers of Your heavenly treasures....”

Music is one of the ways in which we capture those heavenly treasures because the fullness of God's grace is really beyond human language. As you saw during the pandemic when we could not sing as much as normal, music is a primary vehicle of theology and without the vehicle, the expression of the theology can be lackluster. It is with great rejoicing that we are slowly bringing all the singing back as the virus is being defeated.

Typically, we sing five or six hymns on a Sunday in addition to all the liturgy. Sometimes, non-Lutherans are aghast at how much we sing because our tradition as Lutherans has always been to sing rather than speak whenever possible. We have an opening hymn which may be the Introit or may be a hymn to announce the theme of the day. We have a hymn of the day which most clearly will carry the theme of the Gospel and probably the sermon. We have one or two communion hymns that may carry the theme of the day or the general themes of Holy Communion. By the time I was in confirmation, I already understood what we believed about Holy Communion from singing the communion hymns every Sunday for 12 years. Finally, we close the service with hymn that captures the themes of the day or may be a hymn about the close of worship, or it might be, like today, a hymn that celebrates a secular event like Independence Day.

I encourage you to carefully read the words of the hymns during worship. I know that requires work. Mary likes to play a game with the choir. She will have us sing a verse of a hymn from the hymnal and then tell us all to close the book. Once everyone has closed their hymnals she will ask, "what was that verse about?" Most of us have caught on to the game now, but in the early days, we stared vacantly at her like a cow staring at a new fence. We had just sung the words about which she was asking but we were so focused on the tune that we all but ignored the words.

I want everyone in worship to sing, but if you cannot do both sing and pay attention to the words, then I would choose for you to pay attention to the words. The words are where the theology lives. The tune is the handmaiden to the words. The words are the most important thing which is why I frequently preach on hymns. Hymns are musical sermons that are based on God's Word and are often times even direct quotes from God's Word.

Pay attention to how the hymns are used in worship. Listen to the musicians because they are interpreting the text in the same way I interpret the text when I preach a sermon. Is the music softer or louder? Is it full or restrained? Is it light and fluty or is it heavy with vibrating bass sounds? None of these variations are written in

the notes of the score. They are the individual musician's attempt to communicate the meaning of the text to the hearers via the music.

Mary and Kurt have been playing the organ and the piano for a few decades now so they are quite competent in making their instruments make the noises they want them to make when they want them to make them. And yet, you will still hear them practicing every week. Why? They don't need to practice in order to play the tunes to the hymns and liturgy. They could probably do it in their sleep. But they practice playing the music for the same reason I practice preaching the sermon. I may be preaching on a text I have preached 10 or 20 times over the course of 31 years. They may be playing a tune they have played 100 times or even 1,000 times. But this moment on this day for these people has never occurred before. So, the question for the musician is the same as my question. "What is God saying to his people today through this text?"

I study the texts months before I preach so that I can give Mary a rough draft of what I think the message will be and what texts I will use so that she can then begin crafting the hymns for that particular Sunday. If we do what we do well, you will walk away from worship feeling as though the whole Sunday hung together thematically and felt like a single unit instead of a bunch of random things done in some capricious order. Like sermons,

sometimes worship is a diamond and sometimes worship is a stone, but we are shooting for a thematic flow in which the music of the day carries the theology of the day.

The hymnody of the Church is as old as the theology, going all the way back to the Psalms. Whenever the people of God had something important to say, they sang it. The song of Moses, the song of Hannah, the song of King David, the song of Mary, the song of Simeon are all examples of how God people set important truths to music. We still do it today. That's why you feel so strongly about the hymns, the ones you love, the ones with which you struggle, the ones that are must sings at a particular time of the year. Music speaks the language of our hearts and sometimes there are things we long to express to God that we cannot express any way but in song.