

SING A NEW SONG  
Ephesians 5:15-20

On this the fortieth anniversary of Woodstock, we acknowledge that music has always been controversial. The music that my generation loved at that outdoor concert in upstate New York is not everyone's cup of tea. I confess that forty years later I still like the music of Woodstock, especially Crosby, Stills, and Nash. I am acutely aware that many of you here this morning find all this Woodstock nostalgia mystifying. For most of us who are Baby Boomers, it all makes perfectly good sense.

You know the old saying: "It's music to my ears." What's music to some is cacophony, mere noise, to others. Musical tastes range from A to Z. And that's the way it's been ever since Adam and Eve first discovered whistling or humming or tapping with a stick. And if it is any comfort to us, I suspect that Cain and Abel did not like their parent's music either! Everybody has an opinion about music, whether they are tone deaf or not!

After reading a lot of Chinese philosophy of late, my biggest surprise is to discover how opinionated Confucius was about music. Very opinionated! Though he lived some 500 years before Jesus, Confucius sounds like one of those talk-radio hosts railing against rap. In Confucius' case, the objectionable music came from Emperor Wu's court. Of that music, Confucius said, "It is perfectly beautiful, but not perfectly good." For Confucius, music reveals the true character of a person and for him Emperor Wu was a very bad man. And thus his music was not good.

On the other hand, Confucius loved the music in Emperor Shao's court. His words: "I never imagined that music could be so sublime." Why? Because Emperor Shao was a good and gracious ruler. Music is to be judged, in the mind of Confucius, by the character of the people producing it. Ethics in this case trumps pure aesthetics.

Now jump forward to the shores of Massachusetts Bay in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The Puritans came to America to settle in a place where they could practice their "pure religion". They objected to many things in the established church of England, but most especially to the music. So when they got to their new home, one of their first acts was to assemble a new hymnbook. In fact, the very first book printed in the American colonies was the Bay Psalm Book. The year? 1640. The Puritans felt they had corrected

the deficiencies of their old hymnbook by making the words accord more closely with the literal text of the Psalms.

So the very first book printed on the American shores was, in effect, a protest against the Old World and its “corrupt hymnbook.” And thus began the worship wars in the American church in 1640! And these disagreements about music and worship haven’t really stopped since then. Thanks, Puritans, for getting it all started!

I would encourage you this afternoon to get on your computer and Google this phrase: “Worship Wars in the American church.” You will find literally dozens of entries, articles from the left, the right, and the middle. Traditionalists, progressives, mainline Protestants trying to hold the fort together, contemporary Christian musicians arguing for a whole new hymnody. I even read an article by Chuck Colson arguing that the reason the 19<sup>th</sup> Century hymns are still worth singing is that they have stood the test of time. And then I read another article claiming that singing 19<sup>th</sup> Century hymns is like (and I quote) “driving your daddy’s Oldsmobile.”

My own experience of church music ranges all over the map. I grew up in a denomination that practiced a cappella music. Like the Puritans of old, the church of my youth felt that instrumental music was sinful. No pianos, no organs, no guitars, just the human voice alone singing hymns.

I can remember wonderful congregational singing as well as some perfectly dreadful congregational singing! At my college, the gathered voices of 3000 students in daily chapel could be quite wonderful. And of course, the hymns we sang were the old standards. Yes, I know the words to all the old hymns, trust me. From “The Old Rugged Cross” to “I Walk in the Garden Alone” to “Onward Christian Soldiers”, I know the words-all four verses!

When I got to Austin Seminary I discovered the pipe organ, the piano, the occasional guitar or flute or trumpet. Oh my! I did not know what a prelude or offertory or anthem or postlude was until seminary. Not to mention the Kyrie or the Doxology or the Sanctus. I was clueless about the great treasury of church music. And I must say I came to love it, everything from Bach to Handel to Ralph Vaugh Williams to John Rudder.

For the three years before I came to St. Andrew, I was a campus minister at Texas A&M University. Virtually all the music the college students liked was the contemporary Christian music-praise choruses and the like. In fact, the students gave me as a going away gift a large collection of contemporary Christian music. I confess I have never listened to it once. Maybe I simply overdosed on that style of music. There are a couple of

those songs I still like, but not many. However, I know some of you do like that type of music.

Coming to St. Andrew I have enjoyed our variety of music. Many of you may remember that the first staff person we hired after my arrival here in the fall of 1998 was David Ziems, our music director. David and I share many musical preferences from country to rock to classical to jazz. I especially love many of the old spirituals our choir sings. I am so glad that David and Jean are still leading our musical ministry at St. Andrew and I look forward to the choir's return soon.

And yet the controversy about worship and music continues. What the Puritans started with the Bay Psalm Book in 1640 won't go away. And much of it has to do with our aesthetic tastes: the styles of music we prefer, the kind of instruments we like, the tempo we want, etc. Some has to do with our theological viewpoints: the words of the hymns and anthems and special music, the theological tenor of the author.

I remember well the intense arguments in the Presbyterian Church over new hymnbooks. We argued about the 1970 Worshipbook. The issue? The Worshipbook does not have inclusive language. I remember well the arguments about the 1990 Presbyterian Hymnal. The issue? The Presbyterian Hymnal removed some old favorites like "Onward Christian Soldiers". And I remember well the arguments about the 2003 Sing the Faith. Why? Because of its inclusion of the new hymnody and the praise songs. Never fearful of a fight, the Presbyterian Church is now engaged in producing-yes, you guessed it-yet another hymnbook. What happened in 1640 keeps on happening.

So let me weigh in on a current issue facing us at worship here at St. Andrew. To clap or not to clap, that is the question. Some of you feel very strongly that clapping after an anthem or special music is to turn an offering into a performance. It is to lose the worshipful aspect of the music. A Biblical verse comes to mind here, "Be still and know that I am God." A thankful silence is the best response to a musical offering is the argument, in the same way that silence follows a prayer or even a sermon.

Others of you feel strongly that the congregation should feel free to clap after a musical offering. The words of the Psalmist come to mind when you hear something especially moving-"Clap your hands, O you people." For many of you, clapping is ever bit an act of worship as a time of reverent silence.

OK, you say, "Where does the pastor stand on this issue?" Thanks for asking! Truth be told, I think a strong case can be made for either response. After all, "Be still and know that I am God" and, "Clap your hands, O you

people” are both quite Biblical. But since both responses have become something of a problem to some in the congregation, I offer a compromise. By the way, this is what pastors amidst the worship wars find themselves doing all the time-finding middle ground. I would propose that we consider this response after a musical offering—a simple “Amen”. That too is very Biblical, you know! Technically an “Amen” is a response by people in whose name or to whom something has been said or sung. It is a way of affirming what has been offered. Some of our hymns end with an “Amen”. So in the immortal words of Rodney King, “Can we all just get along?” And can I get an “Amen” on that?

Our text from the Ephesian letter says, “Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” A couple of things of note in this text. First, the early church composed new hymns to Christ and sang them in their worship. The Psalter had been the hymnbook of the synagogue and the early church continued their usage. But they also composed new hymns, new songs to Christ. Whenever a fresh new movement of God occurs, the church responds with new songs. It happened in the First Century and it continues even to this day. Creativity in music and hymnody is a response to the fresh new mercies of Christ our Lord. Thankful hearts sing new songs.

Secondly, this passage says “sing...among yourselves”. Music should be an edifying moment of worship where we sing not only to God but also to one another. We seek to build up each other in the faith. When we sing to a child, “Jesus loves you, this I know for the Bible tells me so”, we are sharing our faith with our children. We are saying to them in song, “Jesus really does love you, really!”

So our choice of music needs to not only bring praise and glory to God, but it needs to edify our sisters and brothers in the faith. In fact, our music should draw seekers into the life of the Spirit. Music calls to the heart of seekers and invites them to join the song of the church. That’s why our choice of music is so important.

I heard a country western song in Texas last weekend that reminded me again of the importance of discretion and discernment in the hymnody of the church. This is the first line of that song: “God is great”-so I thought this is promising. Then it said, “Beer is good”-not so promising. Then it concluded, “And people are crazy.” So the song proclaims, “God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy.” Maybe not a good choice for a closing hymn.

Here's the point. Let's be charitable and tolerant toward each other. Our musical tastes vary considerably. A hymn or anthem or prelude that speaks to my brother or sister in Christ may be perfectly dreadful to me. And vice versa. Truth be told, if we are patient and charitable, some of the music some of the time may speak to your heart and your mind. I hope that is true for you every Sunday. I really do. Meanwhile, I promise we will not sing, "God is great, beer is good, and people are crazy." Promise.