

Why We Sing

BY CAROLYN WINFREY GILLETTE

When we come before God in worship, why do we sing rather than merely think or talk with one another? Singing is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, greatest joys, and most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally.

In the aftermath of the devastation caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita, our minds are filled with many images drawn from experiencing these catastrophes firsthand, listening to people who suffered through them, or watching their stories on the evening news. A particularly striking image on the news after Katrina involved the medical staff in a New Orleans hospital struggling to care for patients when their medical facility no longer had electricity, water, food, or medicine to offer. In that horrible situation, several medical staff members gathered around a patient's bed. They sang songs of faith and trust in the only One who could be counted on to help them. They shared the hymns that some of them had heard in worship services Sunday after Sunday throughout their lives, until the words and music had become part of their very being. In that storm-damaged hospital during devastation that's been described as "hell on earth," they were singing together, heavenward.

When we come before God in worship, why do we *sing* rather than merely think or talk with one another? We sing because music is a gift from God. It is a language that God has given us to express our deepest longings, our greatest joys, and our most profound trust in the One who created us and loves us unconditionally. Like all gifts from God, it is one that God calls us to use with gratitude.

MUSIC BECOMES OUR THANKFUL PRAYER

All the music sung and played here
is a gift, O God, from you.

For as long as we have prayed here,
we've been blessed by music, too.
By your Spirit, each musician
finds new depths of faith to share.
Music is a gift you've given
and becomes our thankful prayer.¹

In *A Song To Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*, Don Saliers points out that the gift of music is built into the very being of our bodies—our heartbeats, breaths, cries, and movements. Young children love to bang pots and pans together. Children play chanting games as they jump rope together.² God has given us gifts of sound and music within our bodies, and it is a short step to carry these gifts into our worship of God. Congregational song is “corporeal,” notes hymn writer Brian Wren. “When we sing from the heart, with full voice, some of us use our bodies more thoroughly, perhaps, than at any other time in worship.”³

We sing because music brings us together as a congregation. It brings together generations. Even young children who are part of the worshipping community can find a welcome in the church's singing together. Familiar songs and refrains invite preliterate children to participate. Songs of the church bring together people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Those who share the pews may have vastly different lives, but when they stand and sing, they share the faith that binds them together—God's love expressed in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We sing because our singing is a means by which God strengthens us and helps us to grow as the people of God. In our individual lives, we may say and sing “I.” But the songs of the church invite us to say “we.” They call us to celebrate the faith that we share, and we are reminded of our place in the community of disciples.

We sing because, as those medical staff members in a New Orleans hospital knew, singing is one of many ways that God has given us to cry out in utter despair and in complete trust. Saint Augustine once said that the one who sings “prays twice.”⁴ Sometimes our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs become our “thankful prayers” and at other times they become our desperate prayers, prayers of lament, or prayers of trust and commitment.

We sing because singing connects Sunday worship with everyday life. As Thomas G. Long points out:

In the place of worship, we cannot pray or sing faithfully without our words being full of the sorrows and joys of life. Conversely, the words of worship, prayer words, sermon words, hymn words, Bible words, creedal words, words of praise and penitence, protest and pardon—are like stones thrown into the pond; they ripple outward in countless concentric circles, finding ever fresh expression in new places in our lives.⁵

When we sing “Amazing Grace” together on Sunday morning, it changes us and makes us a little more grace-filled throughout the week in ways that are beyond our understanding.

We sing because God calls us to sing! The psalmist proclaims: “O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” (Psalm 95:1). “Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing” (Psalm 100:1). In Colossians, we are instructed, “with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Colossians 3:16c).

MUSIC HELPS THE CHURCH GROW STRONG

All creation sings your glory;
 in the Psalms are pain and praise.
 Mary sang your saving story
 in her long, expectant days.
 Through the years, with great emotion,
 some have reached to you in song.
 May we sing with such devotion;
 music helps your Church grow strong!

One of the ways that our singing strengthens the Church is by helping us to see our place in the Body of Christ, where members are given different gifts to use for the good of all. If all the Church were sopranos, where would the tenors be? If all the Church were a chancel choir, where would the children’s choir be?

When Christians sing together, the blending of our voices bears witness to the fact that we are made one in Christ. The variety of voices—high pitched or low pitched, on-key or off-key, some soaring to the rafters and others barely above a whisper—reminds us of the wonderful diversity in the Church. “For Christians of all levels of musical attain-

ment, there is the unique opportunity to sing in communal worship, where the critical ingredient is the attitude of the heart,” Ed Norman writes.

“There is an interesting metaphor for the church in group music making: working together under leadership to achieve a common goal of harmony and unity.”⁶ We are reminded, too, that there is a place in the body of Christ for those who cannot sing or speak, those who are uncomfortable

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singing, those who prefer to listen, and those who offer praise through sign language. God provides a wonderful variety of ways to offer praise.

Songs help us to express what we believe about God; at the same time, through songs our faith is formed. Long ago Plato said, "Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes the laws."⁷ His point was rephrased recently in relation to church music: "I don't mind who writes the theological books so long as I can write the hymns."⁸ When we struggle to understand Christian beliefs, we often turn to songs that we have learned in worship. Many of us would be at a loss to define "grace" without saying, "That reminds me of one of my favorite hymns, 'Amazing Grace,'..."

The songs we sing do not have to be complex in order for them to be wonderful expressions of what Christ's followers believe. "Jesus Loves Me" is one of the simplest songs and one that many Christian children learn to sing at the earliest age in Church School. Yet its message is profound. Karl Barth was asked once to summarize all his wealth of knowledge about the faith in one sentence, and he is said to have answered, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."⁹

A few songs are specifically creedal and based on the Church's great statements of faith like the Apostles' Creed.¹⁰ Other songs in more informal ways help us to express what the Church believes in the face of the world's conflicting values. For example, in our workplaces and communities we are bombarded with the idea that the things we own and deeds we accomplish are what make us worthwhile as people. Then we go to church and sing, "Just as I am, without one plea..." The world teaches us that wealth and power are most important, but at church we sing:

You have come up to the lakeshore,
looking neither for wise nor for wealthy.
You only wanted that I should follow.
O Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,
and, while smiling, have called out my name.
Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me,
now with you I will seek other seas.¹¹

While these words are far from those of a traditional creed, they express ideas that are very central to what the Church believes. God's love is not something we earn—it is freely and graciously given—and through this love Jesus calls us to be faithful disciples.

Hymns can express the faith so clearly that they are threatening to those in power. Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat, contains these powerful words:

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

Luke 1:51-53

The message of the Magnificat is so subversive, Elizabeth A. Johnson points out, that for a period during the 1980s the government of Guatemala banned its public recitation.¹² What powerful, rich leaders of nations would want large numbers of poor people to take those words seriously as a statement of belief? Patrick D. Miller Jr. writes, “In a world that assumes...that things have to be the way they are and that we must not assume too much about improving them, the doxologies of God’s people are fundamental indicators that wonders have not ceased, that possibilities not yet dreamt of will happen, and that hope is an authentic stance.”¹³ When we sing together as a congregation, we are affirming our faith that God is still active among us.

The songs we sing as a congregation teach us what it means to be the Church, and they connect us to the Church in ways that spoken words cannot easily do. Hymns and songs sung together can remind us that we are not in this alone; we are part of a community of faith. God calls us to live in community. We are not solos; we are part of a choir—a congregation.

My earliest memory of “church” is of standing on a pew so I would be tall enough to share a hymnbook with my parents during the singing of congregational hymns in a Methodist church in Bridgewater, Virginia. I was not even old enough to read the words in that mysterious, heavy, red-covered book of hymns, but I knew that it was the source of the wonderful, loving songs that were being sung by a church full of loving, caring people. In those songs and in the love of those people who sang them, God was present.

This memory reminds us why it is important to encourage children to be in worship with adults from a very young age. There is much in worship that they may not understand intellectually, but there is also much they can learn about *being* the church with others, and some of this learning happens through song.

**Songs express what the Church believes in
the face of the world’s conflicting values.**

**The world teaches us that the things we
own and deeds we accomplish make us
worthwhile as people. Then we go to church
and sing, “Just as I am, without one plea.”**

When have the songs of the church been meaningful to you? Did you sing hymns on the day of a family member's baptism? When you gathered with other Christians for prayer on September 11, 2001? When you went with a handful of Christmas carolers to visit homebound church members? When, on a mission trip, you had opportunities to sing with Christians in another culture? Whether a thousand voices sing together in great harmony, or two or three gathered Christians sing the songs of faith they know by heart, Christ is in their midst and God is glorified in the community of the church.

At their best, congregational songs are inspirational. "When a congregation sings together, the words of the hymn come alive to them and mean more than just a statement of fact," writes Brian Wren. "Worshippers experience the presence of God."¹⁴ Hymns invite us and welcome us into a relationship with God.

FAITH IS FOUND HERE AND REKINDLED

You give hymns and songs for singing,
toes for tapping your good news,
organ sounding, hand bells ringing,
faithful hearers in the pews.
With the trumpet and the cymbal,
with guitar and violin,
faith is found here and rekindled;
hearts are lifted, once again.

Finally, we sing because our songs invite others into a closer relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Congregational singing is a way of reaching out to share God's joy with others. Because of this, the Church needs to be willing to sing new songs that will speak to new Christians and to "seekers." There is beauty in many of the traditional hymn texts, but churches need to be open to singing new words on occasion.

One of the best comments I've heard about my hymn texts came from a mother who reported on a conversation with her teenage son. After the worship service one Sunday he said to her, "I liked that middle hymn. I actually understood what the words meant."

Another person told me about a worship service in which the congregation sang a hymn that she hated. Shrugging her shoulders, she decided to sing it joyfully anyway. After worship the woman standing next to her confessed, "I was really feeling discouraged when I came to church. I'm dealing with a lot of personal problems. But when we started singing those hymns and I heard you singing so joyfully next to me, you sounded like you really meant what you were singing. I started thinking about the words of that hymn, and it made me feel better." We sing not only for ourselves, but also out of love for others.

At a workshop on hymns, I asked the question: “What church song has special meaning in your life?” Many participants named Christmas carols they loved or songs they had learned many years earlier at youth rallies. But after the workshop, a woman told me a different story. When her husband, a very dedicated Christian, was dying, she and her grown children gathered around his bedside. Together they sang the hymns and songs of the church that had meant so much to all of them through the years. They sang for hours, sometimes singing from a hymnbook, sometimes remembering pieces of hymns from memory, until it was late and they were tired. One by one, they moved from singing to gentle, holy silence, until only the woman was singing to her husband. After a while she began to sing “What Wondrous Love Is This,” which concludes:

And when from death I'm free,
I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
And when from death I'm free,
I'll sing on;
And when from death I'm free,
I'll sing and joyful be,
And through eternity
I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
And through eternity
I'll sing on.¹⁵

As she was singing those words, her husband died. She told me that it was in that moment that he became part of the Church Triumphant, and he began to sing praises to God for all eternity, just as the words of the hymn proclaimed.

We sing because God gives us the gift of song—to offer praise, to express our deepest prayers, to help us grow in our faith, to strengthen the Church, and to share with others. Our songs are imperfect now. Many of us cannot carry a tune. Others of us cannot hear, speak, or understand, but we can only feel the rhythm of the music, or sign the words, or experience the presence of God's love as the congregation sings together. Sharing in the Church's song is a Christian practice that prepares all God's people for an eternity of singing praises to God.

Bless the talents we are bringing,
for we offer you our best.
If our gifts are not in singing,
may our joyful noise be blest.
If our world is ever silent,
may we sign to you above.
Touched by grace, may each one present
offer back your song of love.

NOTES

1 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, "All The Music Sung and Played Here." Copyright © 2000 Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. This hymn, written to the tune of NETTLETON ("Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing"), can express our thanks to God for the gifts of music and singing in worship. I will quote the four stanzas through this article.

2 Don Saliers and Emily Saliers, *A Song To Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 22.

3 Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 87.

4 Noted by Don E. Saliers in "Singing Our Lives," in Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 183.

5 Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 47.

6 Ed Norman, "Music," in Robert Banks and R. Paul Stevens, eds., *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: An A-to-Z Guide to Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 674.

7 Quoted in Patrick Kavanaugh, *The Music of Angels: A Listener's Guide to Sacred Music from Chant to Christian Rock* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1999), 7.

8 David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 192.

9 Quoted by John A. Huffman, Jr., "Jesus Loves Me This I Know" (Christmas Eve sermon from December 24, 2003, available online at www.standrewspres.org/sermons/serm122403.htm).

10 For a recent example, see my hymn "I Believe" in Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *Gifts of Love: New Hymns for Today's Worship* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000), No. 13.

11 "Tu Has Venido a la Orilla/Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore," by Cesareo Gabarain (1979), translated by Gertrude Suppe, George Lockwood, and Raquel Achon (1988), in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 377.

12 Elizabeth A. Johnson, C.S.J., "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," *U.S. Catholic*, 68:12 (December 2003), 12-17.

13 Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "In Praise and Thanksgiving," *Theology Today* 45.2 (1988), 180-188. The quote is on p. 180. This article is online at theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1988/v45-2-article3.htm.

14 Brian Wren, *Praying Twice*, 95.

15 "What Wondrous Love Is This," American Folk Hymn (c. 1811), *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), No. 85.



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