

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, May 17, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
A Reflection for Music Sunday: In Harmony with God

In my reflections today, on this music Sunday, I want all of us to think about our relationship with music and with singing. Do you like to sing? Are you good at singing? Who is the judge? Are you able to sing in harmony? I confess that while I love to sing, I am not good at singing and that I have difficulty distinguishing when I hear harmony or dissonance. As I share some reflections on music, I ask that you also consider in what ways music might teach us to live a life in harmony with God?

I attended choir practice here the first week I was working as your Interim Pastor. I did not attend choir practice with the intent to join the choir. Rather I attended with the intent to introduce myself to them and to get acquainted. As I told them that night, one of the reasons that I will not be joining the choir is due to something that happened to me in fourth grade. My memory is that anyone in my 4th grade class who wanted to was invited to sing in a choir for a special occasion. There were no auditions. After singing our song through once or twice, the music teacher/choir director pointed to me and said, "Will the tall boy in the back row, please not sing?" After singing our song one time without my participation, I was told to return to the classroom and was not permitted to sing with our choir.

While never again trying to sing with a choir or in any public performance, I truly love to sing – especially hymns. My mother loved to sing with me on car trips. We often drove long distances, sometimes late at night and in the wee hours of the morning and we would sing to help us keep awake. We sang songs that both of us had learned in Sunday School or church camps, or just songs my mother would teach me. When I became a parent and grandparent, I loved to sing to my children and grandchildren. I would sing to calm them when crying and I would sing them to sleep at night.

Even though I can read music, I cannot just sing a song by reading the music. I have to hear it sung and become familiar with it before I might feel confident to sing out. Even then, it helps me to see the written notes so that I truly know when the notes go up the scale or down the scale. Once a hymn or other song becomes familiar, I am amazed at how my mind seems to remember it. Sometimes when I have sung a familiar hymn or song, I have trouble getting it out of my head and it just seems to play itself over and over again.

I also have come to appreciate how music is a powerful tool for memory. I studied two years of the French language in high school and two years in college. Today, I remember almost none of it. However, I can sing the French National Anthem in flawless French.

I believe music uniquely connects us to our souls. I believe that music uniquely connects us to God - maybe not all music, but certainly all kinds of religious music – traditional and contemporary. Maybe even love songs. Love songs such as those found in “The Song of Solomon” in the Old Testament certainly demonstrates how deep intimate love for another person so easily translates into deep human love for God.

Chants and other forms of indigenous music also can connect us to God, as well as a wide-spectrum of spiritual music and songs. In listening to music and especially in singing we are often brought into the awareness of the mystery that is God and to God’s presence within us and among us. Music touches our hearts. Music and singing can also connect us to one another in deeper and richer ways.

In 2009 I was introduced to the writings of Oliver Sacks. He is a physician, best-selling author, and professor of neurology at the NYU School of Medicine. He may be best known for his book, The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat. He also wrote: Awakenings, which later became the academy award winning film of the same title. The book of his that I loved the most, however, is: Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain. In the book he shares wonderful insights into how music is processed in the brain quite differently than spoken words. He tells stories of musical savants - people unable to communicate with words, but they can sing beautiful arias or sit at a keyboard and play masterfully. One intriguing thing I remember from reading Musicophilia was that he asked this question: “In the evolutionary process of humankind, what do you think came first, music or spoken words?” He suggests that music was first – in the form of drumming and chanting – since that is common among all indigenous cultures.

Finally, when I was collaborating with Alex on today’s worship service, I mentioned to him that I would share my reflections on music and that I was considering the sermon title: *In Harmony with God*. He immediately shared with me “The Song of St. Cecilia” which Pam read this morning. It begins, “*From harmony, from heavenly harmony, This universal frame began*”. This beautiful poem suggests that music helped in the creation of the heavenly bodies. What a powerful thought. I love also the closing verse that I included for today’s reading, “*But bright Cecilia rais'd the wonder higher. When to her organ vocal breath was given, An angel heard, and straight appear'd, Mistaking Earth for Heaven.*” Mistaking earth for heaven, captures what I have been trying to say about music connecting us to God and about music bringing us into harmony with God. May it be so. Amen.