

Homily, Proper 23B-2, October 14, 2018

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I must acknowledge in advance that my sermon departs very quickly from today's readings, and never really quite gets back to them. Let me tell you how it happened.

In preparing to write this sermon, I found I was intrigued by Jesus' reply to the earnest rich man who inquires of him what he must do to inherit eternal life. "You know the commandments," says Jesus, and proceeds to quote five of the Ten Commandments to him, plus one that's not really one of the Ten. This led me to wonder whether it is significant to find out which ones he omitted – that one might gain an insight into which commandments Jesus felt were the most important, or the least important.

So I Googled the following question: "What is the most frequently uttered divine command in the Bible?" Apparently it is "Fear not." But this is not really what I was after, as many of the appearances of this laudable sentiment occur in narrative passages, where we read that the command is from God, or an angel, to a historical individual or group, not necessarily a general injunction to us as Christians. So after this, what is the most frequent command that could be interpreted as pertaining universally to us? My Google searches informed me that it is this: "Sing to God." Intrigued by this, since my business is singing, I began to read some of the places my search took me, and here are some of the things I learned:

The Bible contains over four hundred references to singing, and fifty direct commands to sing. And this does not include references that do not specifically use the word "sing," such as "raise a voice of melody to the Lord."

The longest book in the Bible, the Psalms, is a book of songs – essentially the Hebrew's hymnal.

What was Jesus doing on the night before his crucifixion? Singing hymns with the disciples, according to Matthew and Mark.

And numerous times in the New Testament epistles we're told to "sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" when we meet together.

So, assuming that frequency has some bearing on the significance of a command, I think one might be safe in saying that singing is one of the most important things God asks of us. Given the amount of singing that goes on here at St. Andrew's, I think we're on the right track in this respect.

But what of singing in our current culture? Some of you are probably quite alarmed to hear that, in a given situation, you would be expected – nay *obligated* – to sing, for there is little call or encouragement to sing in our everyday life, and many of us are uncomfortable with the thought. Unfortunately, in my own lifetime, I've seen singing consistently and increasingly marginalized in American culture, and it is disappearing from most educational curricula before our very eyes.

It is tragic to me how many times I've had someone say to me that they were told in elementary school just to mouth the words to a song because their teacher told them they couldn't sing. I've heard it so often and with such consistency that I have begun to think it is a widely shared social myth, or an artefact of collective memory, rather than a specific event in someone's life.

Implicit in this is the idea that our culture informs us that only a few, select people have the ability to sing, and they are so rare that they generally only appear on "American Idol." And even there, many of the contestants are shamed into silence by a rude panelist passing uninformed judgment on their abilities. Singing has disappeared from our public sphere, our social gatherings, our schools, our campfires, and reportedly continues only in a smattering of showers here and there.

Yet social psychologists continue to uncover evidence that singing is good for you, and that singing with others is a powerful element of social cohesion. A phenomenon called ‘boundary loss’ occurs when people cooperate in singing. That is, though each person comes from dissimilar places and experiences prior to gathering together, singing bonds them together in the present moment, and boundaries that define them as individuals fall away, and the individual is subsumed into the whole through a shared endeavor. Individual **wills** become subjugated to that of the community as a whole, which fashions a much more powerful shared will than even the sum of their individual wills could have created.

So, where did this online odyssey lead me, other than hopelessly astray from today’s readings? Well, it reaffirmed a conviction that has been forming in my mind for a year or more now, regarding a desire to work, in my own small way, for a renaissance of singing in our culture.

And what better place to start from than St. Andrew’s? We already have a reputation as a church with good music. But I would also like us to be known as a *singing* church, where visitors remark on how lustily the congregation sings the hymns and canticles, and are inspired to join in themselves. We often talk of our music as a part of our Evangelistic outreach; let’s also make our hymn singing a way to draw in and inspire people to utter, in the words of our opening hymn, “a more profound Alleluia.”

“That’s all well and good,” you may say, “for someone who has a nice voice, or can read music. But what about me?”

I was deeply moved early this year, at the 9:00 service, which saw the reduction of the number of singers due to our budgetary situation, when Elizabeth and I asked the congregation to step forward boldly, perhaps beyond their comfort zone, and to sing out on hymns and service music despite the lack of professional voices to lead [you/them] . . . **and [you/they] did!** Almost instantly, and without hesitation, [you/they] took over the room with [your/their] voices, joining them

with the organ and the two cantors and filled this space with the sound of praise. It reminded me of what St. John Chrysostom, a 4th century Eastern Orthodox bishop, said in asserting that when humans sing in praise to God, the Cherubim and Seraphim in heaven join in, ennobling our feeble efforts into a great symphony of tribute around the throne of Almighty God. By stepping forward in faith, out of [your/their] comfort zone, God multiplied the mixed vocal offerings of a small band of people into a beautiful chorus. Just as Jesus multiplied the five loaves and two fish into a banquet to feed thousands, our small mortal voices, each relatively insignificant by itself, are blessed into magnificence by our willing and cooperative spirits. Scarcity becomes abundance through a seemingly divine miracle.

So my reply to the person who lacks confidence in their own voice is this: **FEAR NOT!** Raise your imperfect voice in song and let God make of it what God wills. As today's reading from Hebrews says, we do not have a God who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.

So if you are not one who ordinarily or comfortably cracks open the hymnal during the hymns; or if you feel your voice is not worthy to be heard because of perceived lack of beauty or skill; let me encourage you to do so nevertheless, because it is through your willingness and participation that the Cherubim and Seraphim are enabled to take our offerings and multiply them to the ear of the Almighty. In the spirit of our patron saint Andrew, who is the one who offered to Jesus the pitiable five loaves and two fish that then fed a multitude, offer your voice, whether pitiable or mighty, to God, and let's see what God makes of our collective offering.