

Worship Series 2
“To God Be the Glory”
Delivered Sunday, September 18, 2011
By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor
Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

Acts 16:25-35

I grew up going to church every Sunday, and it is easy for me to remember a stretch of time when I thought worship was so boring. I remember spending time during sermons drawing on my bulletin, or studying how the trees swayed beyond our sanctuary’s opaque windows. As a youth I sat in the back of the sanctuary with friends playing “Connect the Dots” and tic-tac-toe. I loved our pastor but his sermons were incredibly dull and long. So I am not sure how I grew up to be such a church geek, not to mention becoming a preacher when few women were preaching, and now passionate about worship that values both tradition and fresh expression, is spiritually uplifting and relevant, a thing of beauty and of praise. But I do know this, even back in those days when I thought worship was an hour to be endured, rather than enjoyed, I always appreciated the music.

Even in my youth, I began to have a sense of what the editor of the new Presbyterian hymnal, David Eicher, has put into words saying, “Community singing helps us remember things about faith. It helps us express our prayers, our lament, our joy – all those things we might have a hard time speaking... There is something about a group of folks breathing together. We have to breathe together in order to sing. I believe we are breathing the Holy Spirit.” (1) I know that looking back over my life – that my faith has been formed by singing hymns, as much as anything else, and that much of what I believe is better expressed in music – than in creeds or confessions or even sermons.

Early church Father, Augustine of Hippo in North Africa, said in the late 4th century, “The one who sings – prays twice.” We understand this intuitively, I think, that singing – and other acts of praise – are full-bodied experiences in which mind and heart and lungs and mouth combine to express a range of emotions and thoughts more powerfully than speech alone. According to the first question of the Westminster Catechism, our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and so the primary work of the church is to nurture us in the activity of praise. What is praise, exactly? It is a word used both with respect to God and people. With either speech or song, praise acknowledges the superlative quality of something or someone. If you listen to the public discourse of complaint and criticism going on all around us, you realize that to be in the habit of offering praise takes practice.

Doris Donnelly has written a book – which I used some years ago as a devotional guide – called *Spiritual Fitness: Everyday Exercises for Body and Soul*. The first spiritual exercise she names is “Praising.” Donnelly believes that we are unaccustomed to giving and receiving praise. She says that if we were asked to stand and give someone we know a full 60 seconds of praise, we would probably have difficulty after about 20 or 30 seconds. Time drags by as we search for true and specific words of praise to bestow. And we would be mightily embarrassed to have someone praise us for sixty seconds. But, she notes, 60 seconds to criticize someone feels like a warm-up – we’ve just gotten started! Wait, we might want to say, there is a lot more to tell you... Donnelly challenges us, as part of our spiritual discipline, to practice the art of praise. Praise of God, praise of each other. Praise that tells the truth and shows the beauty and worth in someone else. If we get accustomed to praising God and praising people we love, she asserts, we can more easily move into the hard work of praising

someone we have difficulty relating to otherwise. (2) There is power in praising that frees us to feel goodness greater than the pain and hurt which become the burden of constant conflict and criticism.

Our scripture reading is a wonderful story about this freeing power of praise. Paul and Silas had gotten in trouble for healing a slave-girl with a special kind of demon possession that enabled her to tell fortunes. This spirit of divination enabled her to earn money for her owners, so when Paul healed her, her owners were irate because the healing took away from them financial gain. So they dragged Paul and Silas into the town square and said to the rulers, "We're not against a little religion – as long as it is kept in its place. But these men are foreigners who are disturbing our city by healing people we need to be kept sick." The crowd fell in line behind, beat them with rods and flogged them, before handing them over to the jailer who was commanded to lock them up securely. He took their feet and locked them in iron shackles.

So the story goes: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. . . Wait, these men beaten and bloody with their legs locked in shackles are singing? Suddenly the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone's chains fall off. The jailer wakes and is horrified. Knowing what happens to jailers who permit their prisoners escape, he draws his sword and prepares to kill himself. Paul shouts: "Don't do it, we're all here, just singing." The jailer asks: "What do I have to do to be saved?" In a word, "What do I have to do to be really free?" Then he and his entire family learn about Christ and are baptized to the tune of great rejoicing.

This story, indeed the witness of all of scripture, shows us that in this enterprise called the church of Jesus Christ you cannot separate our mission from our praise. This is why the bible opens in Genesis with a hymn about the goodness and order of God's creation, and ends in the Revelation of John with the Hallelujah Chorus! The people of God are called to speak of the superlative nature of God; we are called to speak to one another as those made in the image of God. And what we discover by the sheer practice of praise is that God blesses us richly, and touches us deeply so that we can become the little images of God that we are intended to be. As with Paul and Silas, our singing sets us free to live as bold, brave followers of Jesus Christ – in a world which would far too often rather lock up the liberators and throw away the key.

Abraham Verghese's most recent book, *Cutting for Stone*, follows the lives of twin brothers, orphaned at a young age. Marion and Shiva must learn to navigate the world together as they grow up in Ethiopia on the brink of a revolution. Both of the brothers grow up to be physicians, and the novel explores timeless themes of family, magic and medicine, betrayal and the way that two lives are forever intertwined. At one point Marion Stone explains how – against all odds given his impoverished circumstances – he became a surgeon: I chose the specialty of surgery because of Matron, that steady presence during my boyhood and adolescence. "What is the hardest thing you can possibly do?" she said when I went to her for advice on the darkest day of the first half of my life. I squirmed. "Why must I do what is hardest?" "Because, Marion, you are an instrument of God. Don't leave the instrument sitting in its case, my son. Play! Leave no part of your instrument unexplored. Why settle for 'Three Blind Mice' when you can play the 'Gloria'? How unfair of Matron to evoke that soaring chorale which always made me feel that I stood with every mortal creature looking up to the heavens in dumb wonder. She understood my unformed character. "But, Matron, I cannot dream of playing Bach, the 'Gloria'..." I said under my breath. I'd never played a string or wind instrument. I couldn't read music. "No, Marion," she said, her gaze soft, reaching for me, her gnarled hands rough on my cheeks. "No... not Bach's 'Gloria.'

3

Yours! Your *Gloria* lives within you. The greatest sin is not finding it, ignoring what God made possible in you.” (3)

My friends, our Christian vocation, indeed, the high calling of the church is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. When we praise God for all God’s goodness, we are free to praise one another. We are free to live a new kind of life: a Christian life. Each of us has been created with a *Gloria* within. Speak it, play it, sing it – and you will discover you are free to be who God is calling you to be.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Aug. 8, 2011, p. 15.
- 2) Doris Donnelly, *Spiritual Fitness: Everyday Exercises for Body and Soul*.
- 3) Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*, quote from National Public Radio book club site, 7/14/11.