

“Singing Along the Way”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I bet a whole bunch of you didn't realize that Kris is actually a heretic. [Laughter.] It's true - because she plays the evil instrument known as “the organ.” Because, back not too many centuries ago, the organ was a new-fangled instrument that was to undermine the purity of the human soul. That's right, because that organ was found in bar rooms and brothels, and was never to be brought into sacred holiness of a Sanctuary. There were sermons given, there were riots provided to keep Sanctuaries free from the sinful evil of the organ. Now you know what we brought into our Church! [Laughter.] So, the only thing worse than an organ in the Sanctuary was the development of jazz music. [Laughter.] And, look at what you guys have done to us. [Laughter.] Look at how low you have brought us.

Jazz music really got started in the late 19th century, but it really took off at the beginning of the 20th century. It was something that really was special during the time of Prohibition, when you hung out in those basement places where they served illegal booze, and they [musicians] played their illegal jazz music, and it was just one of those horrible things. Again, many, many sermons have been given on the evils of that music that would drive the soul into the depths of hell. You guys have given your lives to that. [Laughter.] Terrible, terrible. In fact, having a jazz band in a worship service would be like inviting Black Sabbath to sing during Christmas Eve services [laughter] - and look what we have done.

According to Daniel Levitin's book (and it's a really good book) “This is your Brain on Music,” [it] said, “today's truths become tomorrow's disproved hypotheses or forgotten object d'art.” One need look no further than Piaget, Freud, and Skinner to find theories which were once widespread, which are now totally debunked - or at least dramatically reevaluated.

In music there are a number of groups who were prematurely held up with lasting importance - that ended up being less than. For those of my generation it was once said that Cheap Trick was the new Beatles. [Laughter.] That didn't quite work out, even though they were from the great place of Rockford, Illinois. And, of course, the one-time *Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll Music* once had as much space for Adam and The Ants as they did for U2. Now if you weren't a pop, glam, punk rocker, you really wouldn't know who Adam and The Ants were - but in the late 1970s and early 1980s they were the “it” thing. But, U2 is still around and Adam and The Ants isn't around too much anymore, so we see that things do change.

Levitin continues, “There were times when people couldn't imagine the day when most of the world would not know the names of Noel Paul Stookey, Christopher Cross or Mary Ford. While Paul Stookey is Paul, of Peter, Paul and Mary, and Christopher Cross - well he received probably as many or more Grammy awards in 1980 as any other artist has ever received - but, unfortunately, the poor guy had a face and body for radio, and this was right before MTV. And, if you don't know who Mary Ford is, shame on you! Not only was she an amazing singer, but that woman could play guitar just about as well as her husband, Les Paul, and let me tell you they were amazing together.

It is alright to include the organ in worship and, once in a while, it's even alright to invite Karla and her near-do-wells. [Laughter.] Time and experience will sort out whether the music for the church is either wheat or chaff. But, today I think it's pretty much wheat. Very good. But sorting out that spiritual wheat from the chaff is important work, because music has been here from the very beginning of civilization. You go back all of the way to the Neanderthals and you will see drama. You see sticks that were beaten together to make a beat. It is somewhere in our DNA to make music, and how we decide what is good and what is bad, what is appropriate and what is sinful – well, that has been up for debate since the beginning of time, as well.

Levitin tells a story about a professor of anthropology named Jim Ferguson. And Jim Ferguson, when he was doing on his doctoral dissertation he did his field work in Lesotho (Lesutu), a small nation that is completely surrounded by South Africa. In studying the local villagers, Jim patiently earned their trust - and he knew he had earned their trust when they asked him to come up and sing with them. When they sang they always danced - so it's the same thing. He was embarrassed because he didn't know how to sing. In fact, his friends - and even more so his family – said, “Jim, you are never to sing - you cannot hold a tune in a bucket.”

So, he said, “No.”

The villagers were dumfounded because they couldn't believe the objection that anyone would have to not singing, or dancing, and they were deeply hurt. Because in Sotho (Sutu) they consider singing to be an ordinary daily activity, like cleaning up after yourself or doing the dishes, or walking, or talking. That is how natural singing and dancing was to them. It was such a part of their lives. It was done in their families and done throughout the village. It was done without thought and - maybe most importantly - it was never evaluated for how good or how bad it was being done. That was the key.

“Our culture,” said Jim Ferguson, “has ruined music because we make a distinction between expert performers. So, the Arthur Rubinsteins, the Ella Fitzgeralds, the Paul McCartneys are allowed, and the rest of us should keep our mouths shut, because we might be alright, but not quite good enough.”

I have heard of churches that even require the individuals in their choirs to audition to sing. That is so terribly wrong. It says to, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord,” and it doesn't mean make a good noise. I have heard some pretty joyful noises that I wouldn't necessarily want to put a microphone to, but they are joyful. And, Jim said, that he knew he wasn't much of a singer or a dancer, but it was more important that he make a joyful noise than to insult the people that he had come to learn, love and respect.

A couple of generations ago in this country - before television - many families would sit around and enjoy music, especially making their own music. I remember families getting together. In fact, there was this family that I was close to, [and] we would go over their house and we would sing hymns, and we would open up the hymnal and mom played the piano, and different neighbors would come over. That wasn't unusual. But then radio kind of stopped it a little bit, but when TV came we didn't have time any more to sing. We didn't have time any more except to stare into this box.

Nowadays, the other thing TV did was help us understand who was good - who was worthy to be performing on television - and the rest of us were not good enough. So, this compartmentalization of music in society didn't happen during Biblical times.

The reason I read Psalm 133 - and it didn't say one lick about music in it - was it was a Psalm of Ascent. When the people were journeying, their pilgrimage, ascending up to Jerusalem - why it's called Psalm of Ascent. They would sing those songs - they were singing the Psalms to gather courage - because it was a dangerous journey, from wherever they were. There were bandits all around. They sang to give each other support. If a line of pilgrims got spread out, to remind them that they were still back there - that there was still a group up ahead, and that they were together. It also scared bandits from attacking because when they heard the loud singing they assumed it was a large group of people. Now this is exciting because this means, Jill, when I'm loud, I'm actually doing the right thing. [Laughter.]

I was visiting out in the hallway and one of my staff people came around the corner. She thought worship had started, because she heard me over the microphone and then realized I was just standing there visiting in the hallway. [Laughter.]

Music was safety. Music was security. But, most of all, music was community; a community gathered together going up the march, *ascending* to Jerusalem, where they would meet with the very presence of the Holy of Holies in the Temple. That joy - that greatness of being in the presence of God Almighty - was worthy of their singing. Nobody *cared* whether it was great or not. That was secondary. It wasn't even secondary. What was primary was that they were communing together, joyously marching, ascending up to the Temple, so they could be in the presence of God.

If you appreciate music, for many of us it is in the moments of music making, especially in this Sanctuary where we experience the Almighty, sometimes the most closely. It's in the music that fills our soul. That is the Holy Spirit working through what you all play and what ignites our spirit. And, I think one of the last vestiges of community singing is in church.

When I was growing up, I feel bad for young people sometimes, because when I was growing up we did singing everywhere, before any kind of event. I remember being dragged to my grandfather's Lion's Club meetings. Sometimes, oh, Good Lord in Heaven, those were the most boring things that God ever created, except they started every meeting with 10 minutes of singing before the gosh-awful, boring meeting started.

Everything started with music and, when I was growing up, you couldn't throw a rock in any direction without hitting someplace where music was being performed. Now it's hard to find a spot where live music is playing. Now, true, there were moments where it was not always great; in fact, when I was growing up in Hibbing, Minnesota, right down there on Howard Street, oh, my gosh, there was a band playing in Kiss make-up and they were all 300 pounds. [Laughter.] And, then I thought, you know that isn't that bad. You know what that means? That even those guys could get played and get air time - there was so much music going on and there are so few places anymore. We can listen to all of the stream music we want. It ain't the same. It is in the *live* music. It is in the *sharing*. It is in the mistakes. It is in the uniqueness. It is in the improvisation that you get life out of the music, and we miss it. In fact, I would argue that it's in the mistakes; it's in the imperfection that the greatest music takes place.

I will give you an example: I like to play guitar – but, I stink at it. And I love listening to it. One of my favorite guitar players is Django Reinhardt. He was a gypsy jazz guitar player. He was amazing. His life was snuffed out far too young - at the age of 43 - but he was a gypsy.

He was married young, when he and his wife were 17 years old, and they lived in one of those stereo-typical gypsy wagons. One night they were going to bed and I don't remember if it was Django or his wife, knocked over a candle. Now she made and sold these flowers that were made of this certain material that was incredibly flammable. Between that and a wood caravan wagon, the whole thing lit up fast.

Django got his wife and dragged her out. In the process his left hand was on fire. By the time they were able to get it out, he was paralyzed - and it wasn't just his hand, it was his whole left side. His leg and his hand were paralyzed.

Over time they wanted to amputate the leg and get rid of some of his fingers - so, he got up and crawled out of the hospital. He wasn't going to hear of it. He walked with a cane the rest of his life, and these two fingers on his left hand [Scott holds up two fingers] and, [if] you are a right-handed player that is kind of tough, were paralyzed. He could sometimes make a chord out of it and [for] any solo, or any speed, or any real pressure, he could only use his three good fingers. It made his music amazing. He did things that nobody ever thought of before: a new way of chording up the neck, a new way of making sounds. But, it was out of the mistake, it was out of him not being good enough to have five fingers that it changed the way music was listened to. He was amazing because of his disability that gave him a greater ability.

Another example of that is a man named Horace Parlan, from New York City. He was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, on January 19, 1931, and he died in February of 2017. He was an amazing jazz pianist and he - at the age of 7 years old - had polio, like so many of that generation. His parents brought in a piano teacher because his right hand couldn't work and they thought if he played piano, maybe he would get some dexterity, and he would be able to do his fingerings a little bit, and get some movement back in that right hand.

Well, lo and behold, this teacher was too impatient to deal with somebody that couldn't get all of the chords the way he wanted them. He [the teacher] gave up on him and humiliated him.

But his parents were not concerned about the music ability. They were seeing this as therapy, in an age where therapy really wasn't a profession. So, finally, by the age of 12 they found a very patient musician who gave Horace lessons. Lo and behold, Horace loved music. This teacher was patient and, while he [Horace] couldn't play with more than two or three fingers on his right hand, he was a master with his left hand.

He started playing. Horace got to be so good - and he loved it - but nobody would play with him, because nobody could play with two or three fingers on his right hand and just his left, so he went and tried to become a lawyer. [He was] almost ready to graduate from law school, and he said, "No. I don't give a rip about being a lawyer. Sorry, you guys. [Scott laughingly said to the musicians and congregation.] But I want to play music and, if nobody else will play with me, I will play for myself and I will start in little bars that cannot afford anybody else, and somebody over time will listen to me," and they did.

Pretty soon he was playing all over New York City. Everybody wanted to hear this new improvisation, with the man who was playing melody lines on his left hand, doing everything backwards. All of a sudden, that bass line was being played up high and the melody was being played on the low notes. Nobody had heard it before and, all of a sudden, everyone wanted to practice and play with Horace. Up until his death in February 2017, he was receiving awards and accolades from some of the finest musicians in the country because he did it in a unique way.

Music isn't just about playing the same way that everyone else is. It isn't about being able to play the guitar like some of the masters, like Les Paul, or I can get a lick just like Jimmy Page. That doesn't matter, and Jimmy has already done it. You can play a lick like Jimmy Page? So, what? I can put on an album and I can play anyone of his licks. But can you play music like you? Can you do something nobody else has ever done before?

When I was in high school I sang at my talent show in Hibbing, Minnesota. I think it was in October 1980 [that] I stood on that stage and I sang. It was the first time for almost 30 years that we actually had a talent show that was a competition and, guess what? I won. Now, before you get excited, the reason that they had not had a competition talent show in all of those years in Hibbing, Minnesota, was because the last time there was a competition somebody got booed off that stage: Bob Dylan.

Now - so the reason I didn't want you to get excited about my accomplishments [is], that shows you the musical understanding of the people on the Iron Range in Northern Minnesota. [Laughter.] Mr. Dylan did it a whole new way and it took a while for people to understand what he was saying - what he was doing. He just had his own way; but it was amazing. He didn't have this gorgeous voice of Sam Cooke or Frank Sinatra - but he had a way that you could not let go of and through that way of listening [that] was so poetic. Frank Sinatra could sing the same thing, but it didn't have the lilt, and you didn't understand the same word the same way, without this way he did it with his musical voice - and yet it was what made the difference in what made a lasting impact in our world.

So, don't ever let anyone say your voice isn't good enough, because God knows what is good, and what's good is your voice singing together with others, It means sharing your music. Everybody has music. It is different for everyone. But, there will be a moment in time where yours is the only music that can make a difference. Unfortunately, there are too many people who have been told they can't [sing], so the world has missed out on so much music - and that is a gift from God.

I pray that like Jim Ferguson, who got up and danced and sang with the people of Sutu, that you, too, will get up and sing your hymns loud as a community event. I don't care whether it sounds a little sour once in a while. It is *our* sour. It is *our* music and we are allowed to enjoy this heathenistic organ and the devil's jazz, because God has transformed it into beautiful music that lifts people's spirit and moves their hearts. And together we, as pilgrim people of faith, march *ascending* toward God's blessed moment, where we hear the spirit of God in the music we sing together.

So now, I ask you, please stand, and let us sing this final hymn with gusto, as God intended.