

Children's Sermon: Why do we sing?

Here is a radical idea that you may have never thought of before. **Are we the only animals that sing?** Now you might say that is a silly question, of course other animals sing; don't we talk about bird song and whale song? Yes, but that is using the word "sing" too broadly. We know that animals make vocal calls as a form of communication for many reasons; there are mating calls, threat calls and calls to define turf (if you can hear me, you are too close). There are also calls to locate others of their kind, or alert them to danger. Now, while most of these calls are growls, grunts, barks, whistles, or howls -- nothing we want to hear when we are outside alone in the middle of the night -- we specifically label **bird song** and **whale song** as such because their sounds seem musical to us; they are pleasing to our ears. But, in asking if animals actually sing, I am using the word very specifically to ask, **do they ever sing simply for their own benefit, to bring pleasure to themselves or others with their music making.** The answer may surprise you and the best way to get to it is to ask ourselves, **why do we sing?**

People all over the world love to sing. I for one deeply love to sing even though usually at a volume level that others wish was on a hill far away; me and bagpipes. I can't help it, for me, joy and singing with abandon go hand in hand; which may be a clue into why so many choirs sing in a similar manner. There's something positive, something downright healthy about raising your voice in song. In fact, there's solid scientific evidence that singing is good in so many different ways for your body and your mind.

Now, we humans sing for many different reasons; like other animals we can use singing as a form of mating call, which explains 2/3^{rds} of country western music. And our protest songs certainly are meant to give warning, show aggression or define turf. But largely we humans sing to express our own joy; because it brings pleasure to us or to others who may be listening.

Music, especially singing, is very powerful in the way that it affects our whole being; linking our mind with our emotions, our head with our heart. Singing can calm our fears, relax our bodies, inspire our courage, or fuel our anger, but most of the time we sing because we are, or want to make ourselves, more joyous. Singing is powerful spiritual medicine for the soul. So we sing mostly for our own personal benefit, because doing so helps to make us happy.

Which brings us back to the question, do other animals do the same thing, singing for their own personal benefit, because it makes them happy?

Surprisingly, scientific studies have concluded there is at least one other class of animals, **song birds**, that sing simply for the joy of singing. Did you know – as I just recently learned - that song birds are not born knowing how to sing their song, they

have to learn their own particular song from their parents. They then spend personal time rehearsing, perfecting, even improvising on their songs. No one who has ever heard a canary sing, would think that they are doing anything other than making music for themselves if no one else. Also parrots, mocking birds, Magpies, and Lyre Birds among others are so good at learning how to sing that, for the fun of it, they learn everyone else's song as well; You Tube is filled with clips of conversational parrots and other birds apparently just for the fun of it mimicking violins, car alarms, lawn mowers and other such non-bird sounds (check out the You Tube video of the cockatoo dancing to various cell phone ring tones <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMaKLLtYPmY>). Anyone who has seen a mocking bird on a beautiful Summer day, dancing and singing up on a telephone wire, going through his repertoire of bird calls, knows that fellow is simply enjoying himself.

But what about other animals. We have great difficulty figuring out what they intend by the other than basic calls that they make, simply because, unlike Dr. Dolittle, we do not speak their language; who knows what a whale is doing with its song.

Yet, while this is strictly conjecture on my part, I would add **that wolves and their cousins the dogs, living in our homes also sing simply for joy**. I draw this conclusion from the fact that while a wolf howl is largely a co-location signal for other wolves ("I am over on this hill, where are you?"), why then when they are all gathered together in a family group do they sit down and howl or yodel into the night. I think they are singing together for the joy of doing so. So, in a similar way when Fido or Fifi joins their howl with your singing, your clarinet practice, or that far way police siren, I doubt that it is because we are hurting their ears. By their body language – eyes shut, ears back, body relaxed, and head lifted up – they are apparently enjoying themselves. So the next time your dog begins to howl to your music, consider that they may just want to join in on the song.

Which is a good segue into today's first scripture lesson. If you think these thoughts on animals singing is a bit wacko, listen to how many different non-human, supposedly inanimate things are singing in Psalm 96.

(read Psalm 96:1-13)

The Psalmist calls for "*all the earth*" to sing to God and declare His praises. And in the closing verses he explains what he means by "all the earth."

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord.

My point is this, our God who made the Heavens and the earth, us and all the other animals, also invented singing; in fact He and the angels were singing together long before we ever existed (Job 38:4-7). I am sure, because He is also concerned for the well-being of all animals – knowing when even a sparrow falls from the sky – that God

speaks their languages as well: from sparrow, to elephant, to humpback whale (Mt. 10:29, Luke 12:6). . So if He sings and we sing, why shouldn't they also sing. God apparently enjoys all kinds of different music. I don't know about you, but I am looking forward to the day when I can raise my voice in joyous abandon along with the cats and rats and elephants together with the trees and the roaring inhabitants of sea and field, in one glorious, cacophonous concert praising the Lord, God Almighty, on that day when He comes to judge the earth.

Which brings us to our next verse, which while also mentioning the songs we sing, has a lot more to say about what we should be doing day to day in our Christian living.

Last week Philip introduced you to Bill, whose boss had concluded he "*just wasn't worth his salt.*" When Bill went to his pastor to find out exactly what that made him worth, he learned three things about salt and himself as a Christian. That like salt, Christians have been called to add **spice to life**; to be those kind of people, who by their joy and good deeds are the ones that others want to be around. He also learned that like salt, Christians are meant to act as a **preservative** in a decaying society. We are the ones who are expected to speak out for and certainly to work at preserving morality and godliness in the world. Thirdly Bill also learned that like salt, in order to be effective, Christians had to be **purely good**; they cannot be a blend of good and bad – which renders them worthless for the salty tasks set before them.

Today's second verse continues along that theme of what a Christian should be doing by what they need to get rid of, get out of their lives and what they need to acquire in order to live a pure – "salty" – God honoring life. Here is a "TO DO" list for every Christian to mark, memorize, write out and stick up on their refrigerator, of what we should be doing in order to become 100% salty for The Lord.

Read Colossian 3:16-17 then choir sings

Sermon: Singing to God Psalm 96:1-17, Colossian 3:16-17

I told this story a few years back, but this is the perfect day to retell it.

An old farmer went to the city one weekend and attended the big city church. When he came home, his wife asked him how it was.

"Well. it was good," said the farmer. "But they did something different. **They sang praise songs instead of hymns.**"

"Praise songs?" asked the wife. "What are those?"

"Oh, they're sort of like hymns, only different," said the farmer.

"What's the difference?" asked the wife.
The farmer said, well, "it's like this ... If I were to say to you, '**Martha, the cows are in the corn**,' that would be a hymn. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you, '*Martha, Martha, Oh, Martha, the cows, COWS, COWS, are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the CORN, CORN, CORN.*' And then, if I were to repeat the whole thing three or more times, that would be a praise song."

Interestingly, the exact same Sunday a young Christian from the city church attended the farmer's small country church. When he came home and his wife asked him how it was.

"Well," said the young man, "It was good. But, they did something different. They **sang hymns instead of praise songs.**"

"Hymns?" asked the wife. "What are those?"

"They're sort of like praise songs, only different," said the young man.

"What's the difference?" asked the wife.

The young man said, "Well it's like this ... If I were to say to you, '**Martha, the cows are in the corn**,' that would be a praise song. If on the other hand, I were to say to you,

Oh Martha, dear Martha, hear thou my cry. Inclinest thine ear to the words of my mouth and turn thy attention in the sweet by and by to this righteous and glorious truth. Yea those cows from our barn in rebellious bovine delight, Have broke free of their shackles, their warm pens eschewed and goaded by minions of darkness and night they all my mild Chilliwack sweet corn have chewed.

And then, if we were only to sing stanzas 1,3, and 5, that would be a hymn."

You laugh, but many Churches in the past, ours included, have long fought over their preferred style of music in what has come to be known as the "**worship wars.**"

Simply put, we like to sing and hear the music we grew up hearing and singing. New tunes, new rhythms make us uncomfortable because they are **A CHANGE** from our normal and **change is always uncomfortable.** As Garrison Keillor pointed out for both rural Minnesotans and older people in general, the comment, "*that's different*," is not a compliment.

But, a large part of our ability as Christians to witness and minister to the people living around us, is in translating those Christian truths we hold dear, **into the best** of their cultural styles: the songs they sing, the instruments they play; yes even their hairstyles and the clothing they wear (*but notice that I said "the best" of what they do. When in Rome don't do as the Romans do. Do as Romans should do.*) Translating his faith into the language, dress, and even music of the Celtic culture is how **St. Patrick** converted pagan Ireland to Christianity in fifth Century A.D. That is also how **Martin Luther** succeeded where previous reformers had failed in bringing the Reformation to European Church.

Before Luther, the only hymns sung in Church, were Gregorian chants, sung in Latin, and sung only by the priests; the lay people just stood around mutely and non-comprehendingly listening. Luther knew that the best way to get Biblical truths into the minds and lives of the everyday Christians, was to get them to sing these truths. So he Christianized the words of popular bar songs, which the people had been happily singing since their youth. Just think, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, was probably once a drinking song. Thus in a real way, beyond the theologians, the Reformation came to the rest of Europe on a song.

As proof to the power of music, think of all the songs and words that we know by heart without even having tried to learn them; which is a problem in itself, because singing is such a powerful memory aid. Those songs and prayers we often repeat – Christian or otherwise – shape what we believe about God and the world we live in.

How many songs do you know by heart.

My country tis of thee....

Amazing Grace

Take me out to the

Yesterday

You aint nothing but

You see the power of Song? French poet Pierre Jean de Beranger (1780-1857) said, "Let me make the songs of the people, and I care not who makes their laws."

Alexander Campbell, founder of the Disciples of Christ, also understood the importance of song. In the introduction to their 1853 hymnbook he wrote, "*The Christian Hymn Book, next to the Bible, wields the largest and mightiest formative influence upon the young and old, upon saint and sinner of any other book in the world... If the hymn book is daily sung in the family, and in the social meetings of the brethren, it must imbue their souls with its sentiments more than all the other labors of the pulpit or the press.*"

This is why those who compose the music and the person who chooses the songs for worship, are potentially the most important "teachers" of any congregation (**bow to Bill Rutledge**).

Thus, as we were newly reminded a few weeks ago, an important discipline of our Christian life is to pay close attention to and critically think especially about the prayers we pray and the songs we sing. For what we sing and pray, strongly influences what we believe. To re-coin a modern truism, *you are what you sing!* Think about that the next time you turn on your favorite rock-n-roll or country music station. **GIGO** (garbage in, garbage out).

Now today, let me point out one more dramatic truth especially about the songs we sing that you may never have considered, Christian or otherwise, whether in a worship service or while mowing the lawn, which is **WHO** is also listening to you sing.

Did you notice that both of today's scripture readings point to a very special audience – beyond ourselves, beyond the congregation - who is also listening to what we sing? Listen again.

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Psalm 96: 1,2

This Psalm begins with a thrice repeated phase: *Sing to the Lord*. In fact, of the 75 times the word "sing" is used in the Psalms it is in this phrase "sing to the Lord. (5:19).

And this advice comes from Colossians...

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;
teach and admonish one another in all wisdom;
and **with gratitude in your hearts sing
psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.**
Colossians 3:16

A similar verse in Ephesians says, *as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and MAKING MELODY IN YOUR HEARTS TO THE LORD.*

Do you get my point? **Everything we do, everything we think, everything we say, is being seen and heard by God our Father, who is watching our heart from the inside, as well as our actions on the outside.** So, we need to remember that the same songs and hymns we sing to cheer ourselves up, we are also singing to God as an act of worship or otherwise. Thus a good question to ask yourself is, *does God like my choice of music?*

A not so honest country bumpkin and his son were walking past a neighbor's corn field which was deliciously ripe and ready to pick. Telling his son to stay on the road and to call out if he saw anyone watching, he snuck into the field to pick some free supper. All of a sudden the boy called out, "*Dad, somebody's watching you.*" Quickly the thief dumped his load and ducked. But seeing nobody, he started again picking corn until once again he heard the boy call out, "*somebody's watching you.*" Seeing nobody, he angrily cuffed the back of the boy's head demanding, "*who is watching me?*" To which the boy replied, "*God is watching you.*"

Yes, God is always watching us, not “from a distance” as another song phrased it, but from a ring-side seat right beside our heart. And if you are a Christian, God is not watching you as a condemning judge, but as either a proud or grieving parent.

That is why our concluding verse in Colossians reads

And whatever you do, in word or deed,
do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,
giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:17

God has assured us that He is paying attention to our needs, our wants, as well as our thoughts and our actions. He knows the intentions behind our prayers and He listens to our songs. **When we sing our songs, hymns and spiritual psalms whether in Church or in our back yard, we are singing them first to God as an act of worship.** That is why so much of our worship service is made up of music, because music pulls us heart, mind and soul into worship.

So whenever you sing, remember that you are first singing to God, your Father, thus you had better have your heart and your mind in the loop and know what you are singing. That is certainly something to think about.

Let's pray.