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Why Don't We Sing More Contemporary Praise Songs?

Psalm 100

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Sermon and Scripture

Today's sermon text is Psalm 100.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

² Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into God's presence with singing.

³ Know that the Lord is God.

It is God that made us, and not we are ourselves.
we are God's people, and the sheep of God's pasture.

⁴ Enter God's gates with thanksgiving,
and God's courts with praise.

Give thanks to God, bless God's name.

⁵ For the Lord is good;

God's steadfast love endures forever,
and God's faithfulness to all generations.

The book of Psalms is a mixture of private prayers, royal liturgy, communal songs of thanksgiving and anticipation, and poems that serve as instruction. Today's text is an example of a simple and direct poem used for teaching. In response to the recognition of God as the Creator and ourselves as God's people, for whom God cares and provides, it is appropriate for us to respond with praise, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth, worship the Lord with gladness; come into God's presence with singing." Sounds simple, right?

Maybe in the ancient Jewish tradition from which this psalm originates it was simple (probably not), but anyone who has spent any time at all in church leadership will say that without fail, at some point in the life of most churches, the music in worship trips us up. This tripping up over music is lovingly referred to as "worship wars" in churches and generally the tension is over which songs or hymns should be sung in worship. Every single church I have ever served has had this discussion. And believe me, sometimes it is more than a discussion.

Today's question, "Why don't we sing more contemporary praise choruses?" was asked, as I mentioned before, because the one who asked the question has heard me criticize the theology in a lot of contemporary worship music. So, I want to say up front that I celebrate, that within the community gathered in this room and online, there are many different beliefs represented. In this sermon series, we have talked about some of those differences, like the language we use to talk about God and human beings and the various ways we understand Jesus. I think I've been pretty clear...this community and this pastor, value diversity of thought and belief. In the words of Unitarian preacher, Francis David, "We need not think alike to love alike." You may disagree with me and, if you do, I would love to talk about that. I hope this sermon will help you

understand how Alex and I think about music and appreciate how hard it is to sing everyone's favorite in corporate worship.

This sermon is about why certain songs are more or less appropriate for corporate worship. To get us started, let's talk about the purpose of corporate worship. Why are we here?

Many of you are thinking, "The minister said I have to come." Ummm. Not true. The minister encouraged you to come. You're welcome.

But really, we are here:

To celebrate what God is doing in the world and in us.

To give thanks for what we have, what we have experienced, and the gift of community.

To be together, with one other and to take note of God's presence with us.

To learn and grow because when we know better, we do better.

To prepare for the journey ahead and to encourage each other.

I think my job in corporate worship (and in ministry in general) is to make God accessible to everyone. And what I know about that is what is said here, in this space, matters. Words matter. Language matters. Theology matters. And so, what we sing in worship matters. This morning, with Alex's help, I hope we can have a little bit of fun because we've covered a lot of heavy topics in the last few weeks. I hope this feels a little bit lighter. Before I begin, I want to say that there are songs I really love that I would never choose for corporate worship. It doesn't make them bad songs. They are songs that, rather than making God accessible, confuse or alienate some people.

So, if I use your favorite song as an example of what we are not going to sing in worship, please don't feel attacked and tweet #myministerismean.

I first began to pay attention to worship music, beyond just what I liked and didn't like, when one day in worship about 20 years ago, I realized I was singing something I didn't believe. We were singing a praise chorus, which meant we were singing the same phrase repeatedly and I thought, "Why am I singing this? This is not true for me." I asked the minister of the church about it later and he said he didn't believe it either, but people in the congregation really like the song, even though, in his opinion, most people in the congregation didn't believe the words they were singing. Not having any idea that I would end up in seminary and on this side of the pulpit someday, I smugly thought, "If I was the minister, things would be different." Right. Thoughts like that are my proof that God must like to laugh.

Nine years ago, when I was the youth minister at a Presbyterian Church, the Director of Music and I read a book together called *The 6 Marks of Progressive Christian Worship Music*, by Bryan Siracho. It changed the way I think about worship music. Since then, I've used the ideas in that book to help explain what I think is important about worship music and to guide choices for what's used in worship. If you are interested in reading it, Alex and I both have a copy we would loan. Let's look at the 6 Marks of Progressive Christian Worship Music.

Mark 1: Progressive Christian worship music emphasizes praise, justice, and the fullness of human experience.

Many, many, in fact most, contemporary worship songs are praise songs only. They are songs that celebrate the greatness of God, but unfortunately, the language about the object of our praise (God) is so vague that we end up worshiping our own worship.

Song: How Great is Our God

*How great is our God, sing with me
How great is our God, and all will see
How great, how great is our God
Name above all names
Worthy of our praise
My heart will sing
How great is our God
You're the name above all names
You are worthy of our praise
And my heart will sing
How great is our God
How great is our God, sing with me
How great is our God, and all will see
How great, how great is our God*

There is nothing wrong with celebrating God's greatness, in fact, that is one of the reasons we gather weekly in this space. But worship music that only includes praise songs falls short. Think about Micah 6, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

In his book, Siracho writes, "To be blunt, God is not a Divine Ego-Maniac, who needs to be told how wonderful He or She [sic] is all the time." Again, praise helps us de-center ourselves and puts us in a place to cooperate and co-create with God and with other people. Praise is good, but we also must sing about the rest of our lives in relationship to what God dreams of for this world and for our lives and relationships to other people. So, a better choice to being worship is:

Song: Welcome

*Let's walk together for a while and ask where we begin
To build a world where love can grow and hope can enter in.
To be the hands of healing and to plant the seeds of peace,
Singing welcome,
Refrain:
Welcome to this place.
You're invited to come and know God's grace.
All are welcome, the love of God to share,
'Cause all of us are welcome here; all are welcome in this place.*

Mark 2: Progressive Christian worship music uses inclusive language. As I said earlier, words matter, language matters. We have talked at length about the importance of using inclusive language for God and for human beings in corporate worship. We do this, not because it is wrong to address God as father in our personal prayers, but because we recognize that for some people, especially people who have experienced trauma related to fathers and father figures, God as father is not a helpful metaphor. God does not become more accessible when we sing songs about God that hinge on ideas that trigger people who have experienced trauma. Songs that hinge on the singular maleness of God are problematic for many people.

Song: Good, Good Father

*Oh, I've heard a thousand stories of what they think You're like
But I've heard the tender whisper of love in the dead of night
And You tell me that You're pleased and that I'm never alone*

*You're a good, good Father
It's who You are, it's who You are, it's who You are
And I'm loved by You
It's who I am, it's who I am, it's who I am*

In addition to paying attention to how we talk about God, talking about human beings in gender neutral ways makes God accessible to everyone and invites all people to see themselves and their own experiences in who and what we sing about. We won't get it right all the time, but we should try. God and human beings will always be more than the names and metaphors we use to talk about them. Our call is to include everyone.

Song: God of the Moon and Stars

*God of the moon and stars
God of the gay- and singles bars
God of the fragile hearts we are, I come to you
God of our history, god of the future that will be
What will you make of me, I come to you*

*God of the meek and mild,
God of the reckless and the wild
God of the unreconciled, I come to you
God of our life and death
God of our secrets unconfessed
God of our every breath, I come to you*

Mark 3: Progressive Christian Worship music embraces progressive theology. I don't have time in this sermon to unpack everything about progressive theology, so if I breeze by something that you would like to talk more about, please don't hesitate to email me. Siracho describes Progressive Christianity like this, "Progressive Christians tend to be deeply drawn to the welcoming, inclusive, unconditional love that is at the heart of the biblical message...this welcoming love leads progressive Christians to place a premium on honoring and respecting the spiritual journeys of all persons. Wherever they happen to be in their lives....At our best,

progressive Christians encourage all people who embrace other religions or no religion at all to understand that we are all loved and accepted by God.” But sometimes the words we sing sound a lot like we believe our way is the way.

Song: Come, Now is the Time to Worship

*Come, now is the time to worship
Come, now is the time to give your heart
Come, just as you are to worship
Come, just as you are before your God
Come
One day every tongue will confess You are God
One day every knee will bow
Still the greatest treasure remains for those
Who gladly choose You now
Come, now is the time to worship*

Most Progressive Christians do not believe or even hope for “one day everyone will confess you are God and one day every knee will bow...” What we would say is that God loves all people, Christians and people who are not Christians. And we believe there are many paths to what is Holy.

Song: Come Just As You Are

*Come just as you are
Hear the Spirit call
Come just as you are
Come and see
Come receive
Come and live forever*

Because of our emphasis on love and inclusion, there are some things that are not emphasized in Progressive Christian worship music.

One example of that is the doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement which is the belief that God sent Jesus to be sacrificed on the cross to pay the price (atone) for the sins of others. Most Progressive Christians feel this doctrine paints an inauthentic picture of a God that is overly judgmental, legalistic, vindictive, unloving, and even abusive. I have mentioned before that this doctrine was a later development of the Church and not part of how Jesus understood himself, nor does it represent how I believe God works.

The rejection of this doctrine is why our music will not include references to being saved from hell and “blood language,” like this gem.

Song: Nothing But the Blood of Jesus

*What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

*Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

Mark 4: Progressive Christian worship music emphasizes both the individual and community. In worship, we are each having our own experience and we are having a communal experience. Contemporary Christian music leans heavily on the individual experience. Much of the music contains I, me, and my in the lyrics. There isn't anything wrong with each one of us having our own personal experience, in fact, it's necessary in order to grow into the people we were created to be. But we only worship together once a week, so in that time we should sing songs about all people, about community, about unity. Worship is not all about "me" and God doesn't just belong to me.

Song: You are My All in All

*You are my strength when I am weak
You are the treasure that I seek
You are my all in all
Seeking You as a precious jewel
Lord, to give up I'd be a fool
You are my all in all*

Who does God belong to anyway?

Song: Shout to the Lord

*My Jesus, my Savior
Lord there is none like You
All of my days I want to praise
The wonders of Your mighty love
My comfort, my shelter
Tower of refuge and strength
Let every breath, all that I am
Never cease to worship You
Shout to the Lord, all the earth let us sing...*

Actually, I think John Lennon sang it well when he sang, "Imagine all the people, living life in peace..."

We look for songs that embrace community, using "we and us" instead of I and me.

Song: Gather Us In

*Here in this place new light is streaming
Now is the darkness vanished away
See in this space our fears and our dreamings
Brought here to you in the light of this day
Gather us in, the lost and forsaken
Gather us in, the blind and the lame*

*Call to us now and we shall awaken
We shall arise at the sound of our name*

Mark 5: Progressive Christian worship music strives for emotional authenticity. There is a delicate line to be walked here. Of course, part of worship is feeling something. But what is it that we feel? I don't think it is appropriate to yank people around by their emotions every week. It feels very contrived. We have all been in situations where it was clear we were supposed to feel something deeply and we didn't. We all feel different things, which makes it really hard to choose music. I don't know if you have noticed this or not, but there are a lot of worship songs written that sound an awful lot like romantic ballads...sappy love songs of the 70s. We call these songs "Boyfriend Jesus songs." And we avoid them here because Jesus is not our boyfriend.

Song-Heart of Worship

*When the music fades
All is stripped away
And I simply come
Longing just to bring
Something that's of worth
That will bless your heart
I'll bring you more than a song
For a song in itself
Is not what you have required
You search much deeper within
Through the way things appear
You're looking into my heart*

If you can imagine singing the song to your love interest, it's not a good fit for progressive corporate worship. Also, note the "I and my" in that song.

Alex sang a song for the prelude this morning that is a great example of a worship song that expresses emotion, but not sappy, "I keep falling in love with you..." emotion.

Song-Here and Now

*We want to be a church where freedom reigns
We want to be a people full of grace
We want to be a shelter where the broken find their place
We want to be a refuge for the weak
We want to be a light for the world to see
We want to be a love that breaks the walls and fills the streets
All are welcome here
As we are
As we are
For our God is near every heart
Let Your mercy rise
Let Your hope resound
Let Your love in our hearts be found*

*Let Your grace run free
Let Your name bring peace
Heaven come in the here and now*

And last, Mark 6: Progressive Christian Worship Music uses fresh images, ideas, and language. For a very long time, Christians have been singing about God and faith using the same images. Some of those images don't really make much sense if the purpose of them is to connect the mysteries of God and faith to ordinary things in our lives in order to help us understand them. For example, we sing a lot about God as a king. Most of us have never lived in a place where there was a king. Although, we have watched plenty of Disney movies about kings. Is this imagery really meaningful to this time and place?

Song-Majesty #50 CP

*Majesty, worship His majesty
Unto Jesus, be all glory, honor and praise
Majesty, kingdom authority...*

Wow. There's a lot to unpack there. The general idea for Mark 6 is that God is not accessible when we sing about God and our faith using ideas we don't know much about. I don't know what it is to be a sheep in need of a shepherd, to be the subject of a king, or a wretched wretch in need of saving. What Progressive Christian Worship should do is allow us to sing what we believe, sing what we hope for, and sing together. There are a lot of really beautiful images we can sing about, that express who we are as Christians and what we believe God wants the world and us to be like. I will end this morning with one of the most beautiful. This is **Crowded Table**.

*You can hold my hand
When you need to let go
I can be your mountain
When you're feeling valley-low
I can be your streetlight
Showing you the way home
You can hold my hand
When you need to let go
I want a house with a crowded table
And a place by the fire for everyone
Let us take on the world while we're young and able
And bring us back together when the day is done
If we want a garden
We're gonna have to sow the seed
Plant a little happiness
Let the roots run deep
If it's love that we give*

*Then it's love that we reap
If we want a garden
We're gonna have to sow the seed
Yeah I want a house with a crowded table
And a place by the fire for everyone
Let us take on the world while we're young and able
And bring us back together when the day is done
The door is always open
Your picture's on my wall
Everyone's a little broken
And everyone belongs
Yeah, everyone belongs
I want a house with a crowded table
And a place by the fire for everyone
Let us take on the world while we're young and able
And bring us back together when the day is done
And bring us back together when the day is done*

Amen.