

## “Praying Twice”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
Interfaith Thanksgiving Service – November 24, 2015

### Psalm 100

Thank you all for coming out tonight, to offer thanks to God with your brothers and sisters in faith. I know this is a busy week for many of you. So I am grateful you took the time to be here together. I hope this service is a blessing to you.

My topic this evening is not “Singing Twice” as is printed in the bulletin. I meant to write “Praying Twice,” but I got it mixed up in my mind, because people say that when you sing you pray twice. Hopefully I will explain what that means in this meditation: Singing is Praying Twice.

My office upstairs is surrounded by our nursery school classrooms. The nursery school hires a young man who plays the guitar to lead music with the children. I can’t help but overhear the singing lessons, and this guy does a fine job. He’s an excellent musician and singer, and the children are engaged and they love him. The problem is, most of the children don’t know how to sing. He is trying to teach them, but their default mode is shouting the words without a melody.

Most adults know how to carry a tune, but these days the quality and access to recorded music is so good, that singing among ordinary people is becoming a lost art. People will sing along with recorded professionals, but when it comes to singing out loud with a group, many people have little confidence, or they’re simply embarrassed. So they sit as far apart as possible and mouth the words feebly. Parents will play recorded music for their children, but few parents sing with them anymore as part of a regular family activity, like bedtime songs, or singing in the car.

Augustine wrote that “singing belongs to one who loves.” And singing is one of the most important ways we express our love and worship to God. The Hebrew scriptures constantly instruct us to sing to the Lord. Pastor Dean read from Psalm 100 this evening, “Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God’s presence with singing.” Over and over, hundreds of times, our scriptures tell us to make melody or sing to God. And the book of Revelation envisions heaven as filled with continual song, to which our own voices are added when we sing praise to God.

Singing songs of faith engages our whole selves and can transform us. If you simply read the text and mouth the words of a sacred song, you engage your mind. But when you sing, you engage your heart and soul, the very center of your being. That’s why people sometimes start to weep when they sing, or are overcome with joy. Singing opens us up, and allows us to experience the life-transforming power of God. It can change our thinking. It can change our attitudes. It opens us up to life.

Last week the New York Times Sunday Review had an article titled, “Choose to Be Grateful. It Will Make You Happier.”\* This is not news. People have known for a long time that practicing gratitude raises our overall level of happiness. But this article calls us to practice gratitude even when things are not going well, or we aren’t feeling particularly grateful. Many people in this country thank God for obvious things: family, food, comfort and safety. But what if you have no family to speak of? What if you’re a refugee, who can’t find a safe place to live? Many people live in a world of war and terrorism, injustice and racism, disease and poverty. Should they force themselves to praise God anyway?

According to this article, yes. Even when life is difficult, we can find some things to be thankful for, and it makes a difference if we do. Just take a breath. We can thank God for the air we breathe. We can be thankful for the smell of fall, or the beauty of sunlight shining through a tree. We can be thankful for the song of a bird, for a drink of water when we are thirsty, a kind word, or simply for forgiveness and mercy. Singing thanks to God lifts us above our immediate circumstances, connects us to the divine, and gives us energy and power to work for justice when things are not right in the world, and to help each other. The Psalmist calls on all the earth to make a joyful noise. When we sing thanksgiving and praise to God, it brings us together with people throughout the world and with the whole of creation.

Now I know some of you have told me that you really can't carry a tune, and singing is not worshipful for you. It's just frustrating. But most people, with a little help, can learn to carry a tune. And even if you can't, the Psalmist didn't tell us to sing a beautiful and well-rehearsed aria to the Lord. He wrote, "Make a joyful noise!" Anyone can make a joyful noise. And you can count on the rest of us to carry the melody, or even add harmony if we know how. It might sound like noise to some. But to our God it's a prayer, and a double prayer, because we're not only saying or thinking the words, we are putting ourselves into the words and offering them to God.

Tonight Pastor David led us in Psalm 103 in the Call to Worship, where we said, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless God's holy name." All that is within us... all that is within us, we offer in worship to God. Maybe we need a little less dignity and reserve in worship, and a little more passion, to throw ourselves into it.

So tonight I invite you to sing a song that is not exactly dignified. It's actually a bit rowdy. But I invite you to sing it praying twice: once with your mind to say the words, but also to double the prayer as an offering to God with your heart and soul. Now, we know the song here in this church. It may not be familiar to the rest of you, but it's simple enough to sing. You can catch on right away and join us. AND I have a few instruments here that can add to the joyfulness of the noise, and I invite you play on the chorus. Who would like an instrument?

Credit for some of the ideas in this sermon to the Rev. Dr. Fred R. Anderson, "Praying Twice," sermon preached at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, NY, May 22, 2005.

"Choose to Be Grateful. It Will Make You Happier," by Arthur C. Brooks, The New York Times, November 22, 2015, Sunday Review, page 4.