

How Can I Keep from Singing?

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Third Presbyterian Church
May 31, 2015 (Trinity Sunday)
Ephesians 5:15-20
Dedication of New Hymnals

We dedicate new hymnals today. They have been inflated to the proper air pressure, labelled, and placed carefully in the pews. The names of those who have helped this process from conception to implementation are listed in the insert in the bulletin. Huge and special thanks to them, to various committee members, to Peter DuBois, to Cindy Mark and Dale Maddock and to Brad Sparks, who engineered getting the new hymnals in their places. Thanks to all of them. Thank you for contributing your financial resources to make this happen. Take a moment or two now or later to review this list, as I have done many times in the last few weeks. It is a deeply moving exercise.

There are many things to say today, but I won't say many of them at all. You will. You will sing them. If I stop, that's your invitation to join in on several new hymns. (*Publication information for hymn texts available in the hymnal itself.*)

It's a basic question that we don't ask very often because we actually live out the answer every time we gather. What does a hymnal do? The first task of a hymnal is to do exactly what the title of our new hymnal suggests – *Glory to God*. If our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, then the primary task of a hymnal is to help us glorify God.

That looks like many things. There are many forms of praise, and many ways to sing God's praise. This new hymnal reaches back in the tradition where we can sing many of our favorites (including some not in the previous hymnal) and it also looks around and ahead to new traditions.

Our first singing tradition was Psalms only. We believed that anything written by humans was something akin to idolatry. We have evolved, thankfully. You can read the mission statement of the new hymnal on page 926. As we sing familiar hymns and sing new ones, from diverse cultures and experiences, pay particular attention to the many ways we praise, worship and glorify God, our central calling. We have done that already as we sang a bedrock hymn on this Trinity Sunday, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

But a hymnal does other, related things. It is a kind of theological text book. It helps us understand and ponder what we believe – about God, about the world, about humanity, about the church. Think about your favorite hymns and think about what they are teaching you – overtly or indirectly. About the life of Jesus. About the nature of God. About grace, sin, hope, peace, love, faith. Throughout the year, as we choose hymns, we seek ways to connect what we have heard from the Bible and what we have engaged in conversation with the words we sing and the tunes that accompany those words. Singing the faith to learn the faith.

To expand on one aspect of that teaching and learning, a hymnal helps us reflect on what it means to be the church – who we've been and who we are.

“What Is This Place?” Hymn 404

*What is this place, where we are meeting?
Only a house, the earth its floor.
Walls and a roof, sheltering people,
Windows for light, an open door.
Yet it becomes a body that lives
When we are gathered here,
And know our God is near.*

*Words from afar, stars that are falling.
Sparks that are sown in us like seed;
Names for our God, dreams, signs and wonders
Sent from the past are all we need.
We in this place remember and speak
Again what we have heard:
God's free redeeming word.*

*And we accept bread at his table,
Broken and shared, a living sign.
Here in this world, dying and living,
We are each other's bread and wine.
This is the place where we can receive
What we need to increase:
Our justice and God's peace.*

I hope you noted the simplicity of this description of who we are, and the continual “yet.” Yet. Yet we are a body that lives. Yet we are a body that remembers and speaks. Yet we are a body that breaks bread in order that we increase God's justice and peace.

What does that look like?

“Let Us Build a House” Hymn 301

*Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true,
where all God’s children dare to seek to dream God’s reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness and as symbol of God’s grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine, and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space;
as we share in Christ the feast that free us:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they’ve known.
Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God’s face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

*Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

The hymnal reminds us that our vision is to build a house of love where all are welcome. And the key reminder of that remains in that title – *Glory to God* – that it’s not us doing the building and it’s not our house. God is the builder and it is God’s house, where all are welcome because God welcomes all, just as God is the creator and it is God’s creation, just as God is the composer and it’s God’s symphony.

The hymnal becomes for us, therefore, a vehicle to glorify God. It becomes a resource book whereby we can learn and teach the faith. It becomes a symphony of comfort and inspiration and provocation. A blueprint for mission, a living, breathing strategic plan. We have others ways to do those things, and even other books. But this book takes special place because worship takes special place and music holds special place.

As I said when we dedicated our renewed space I will say about these hymnals – our task now, having dedicated them, is to wear them out, with our worship, with our praise, with our service, to sing the songs of our tradition and to launch new traditions to pass on to the generations that will follow.

We have good news to receive, and good news to share, and a ministry that builds community within and that reaches out beyond our walls. If this hymnal helps us do that, then thanks to all who provided for it, and thanks to God who welcomes us in and sends us out.

If this hymnal helps us do that, then the question “how can I keep from singing?” will find continual and joyful answer.

“My Life Flows on (How Can I Keep from Singing?) Hymn 821

*My life flows on in endless song,
above earth's lamentation.
I hear the clear, though far-off hymn
that hails a new creation.*

Refrain:

*No storm can shake my inmost calm
while to that Rock I'm clinging.
Since love is Lord of heaven and earth,
how can I keep from singing?*

*Through all the tumult and the strife,
I hear that music ringing.
It finds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing?
(Refrain)*

*What though my joys and comforts die?
I know my Savior liveth.
What though the darkness gather round?
Songs in the night he giveth.*

(Refrain)

*The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
a fountain ever springing!*

All things are mine since I am his!

How can I keep from singing?

(Refrain)