

## Mutual Alleluia

### [Ephesians 5:18-20](#)

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Sunday, September 7, 2008

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

At the heart of this church, at the heart of the nature of God and the way God has called us into community— is worship. But worship will lead us, inevitably, towards patterns of growth and service. And so we have our order of the next three Sundays: Worship, Grow, and Serve. Along with that, we look at texts in the New Testament that accent our life together, or are referred to as “One-Anothering texts” — how we are to encourage one another... to love one another... and to serve one another. And so we look today at Ephesians, chapter 5, beginning with verse 15, and right before that, the brief hymn. Now listen to the Word of God: "Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you. Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." This is the Word of the Lord. Let us pray together. And so, we give thanks to you, Almighty God, for your Word now to us, in Jesus Christ. We ask that you speak to us by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we sang that opening hymn this morning, you may have had recurrent memories of the opening and closing scenes to that movie, "Chariots of Fire." The challenge in that movie was to compare people who are motivated by worship of God versus those who are motivated by the discipline of running, or their own motivations in life. Do we worship human success or Divine Presence? Do we worship the creature or the Creator? It is God who works the mighty wonders; it is God who administers those who win and lose. So be careful how you run! Or, as we would say, from the Apostle Paul, "Be careful how you live." That, in fact, is the last word of worship. It is the benediction and blessing that we go out with from every service: "May God bless you as you go out into the world to live righteously and justly in the way of Jesus. For that is whom you have worshipped today."

Worship leads to life action. For the follower of Jesus, worship of God should lead us to pay careful attention to how we live. Worship of God, through the exercise and disciplines of music, poetry and singing, should move us from darkness and out into the light. Worship has a direction and momentum to it; it is not just about what is happening here and now. It is about how it propels us out into the world. We worship God in Jesus Christ; therefore, we should lead lives that reflect the life of Jesus in the world. Worship centers our being in God and then thrusts us into the doing of things that are in the world— to do the mission of God, in Christ: to do mission in our work... our governance... our decisions... our families... our values.

Now we tend to be built, as human beings, to be drawn into transcendent (or big) events. We are invited there to celebrate something bigger than ourselves. And these grand moments tend to propel us both upward and outward; they give us a higher sense of nobility and a greater purpose. Have you noticed, during the month of August and early September, how many times we Americans have been invited into huge crowd events? The Olympics... the Democratic Convention... the Republican Convention... even the Redskins' opening game? These large gatherings of humanity are full of carefully-planned music, art, color, drama, procession, dance, liturgy, speech, and cheering. We Presbyterians have the hardest time with the cheering piece! These are events designed to lift and to motivate us to celebrate and become the best humanity we can possibly be.

Unfortunately, while these events focus on the heroic potential and accomplishment of human discipline and endeavor, they are not centered, generally, on the glory of the Creator. They tend to focus on the glory of the creation and the creature. They resonate in praise of the best and the brightest that we human beings can muster. These are a kind of shadow worship experiences—to show the worth of a country, the

value of a people, the power of a leader, the glory of the human race. And these events gravitate toward worshipping the heroic possibility of human accomplishment. And most often from these events, there is an outcome that's implied. The great and the grand gathering, the planned ceremony, and the noble celebration, are designed to inspire us and lead us to better lives—to become a more disciplined people; to reach higher and reach out further. The events are designed to propel us out from among ourselves, to do better in the world: become the best athlete; become an accomplished artist. Become the loyal Republican or Democrat. Go out there and win for your party or your nation. Go out there and persuade others to choose your candidate. Go out there and change the world for the better. Go out there and live life to the fullest. In the secular culture, we gather in these quasi-worship experiences for our heroes and our accomplishments so that we will go out and do mission for them.

As I was preparing this sermon on Friday, I had the radio tuned to the classical music station which tends to right now, on this weekend, have an emphasis on the three B's: Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. They were playing Beethoven's 3rd Symphony, the "Eroica." And when I hear the "Eroica," I am moved to heroic kinds of feelings. I think that's what Beethoven intended—to move the listener to celebrate and follow a hero, whether it may have been Napoleon, or even Beethoven himself. In the "Eroica," you can feel and hear Beethoven's hunger to worship greatness and to call people into nobility. But there is a yearning for more. There is a beckoning to sovereignty that is beyond. There is an invitation to gather around the glory and to go out into the world to change it.

But as heroic as his music is, it most often yearns for the worship of God but does not engage in the worship of God. It is about the worship of human endurance and possibility; it is human romanticism in all of its glory. It delivers us to the edge of the fountain of God, but leaves us thirsting for more. And maybe that's what romanticism ultimately is—there's got to be something more. The Beethoven symphonies... the Olympics... the Conventions... the football games... finally, they do not fully deliver. The composers, the great music, the glorious ceremonies, all miss the mark. They seek the creature and what the creature can create, but they do not seek the Creator. We have worshipped the wrong Hero; we have followed the wrong Savior. We may have enjoyed the grandest of music. We may have heard the most wondrous of speeches. But we have made glorious object of the wrong subject. We have magnified the lesser story. We have looked through the darkened glass. We have sinned and we have fallen short of what God intends in worship, in these big events. We have worshipped the creature and we have eclipsed the Creator.

This is why we need to worship God—intentionally and regularly. If we don't, we will worship anything and everything else. We human beings are built to worship; we hunger for it. This is why we need to set God in the heart of our poetry; in the cross-hairs of our metaphors; in the sights of our images; in the designs of our stage; in the liturgies of our ceremonies; and in the logos of our words. Note the words of the hymn Paul quotes here in Ephesians, that simple hymn: "Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."—one of the early great hymns of the resurrection. Our human artistry, you see, needs a resurrection, even as good as it is. If art, music, speech, and worship are not basking in the light of Jesus Christ, we will continue to be clouded in our thinking... blurred in our focus... stunted in our imagination... short-sighted in our vision... and dead in our own glory. Our attempts at worship may look good, sound good, and feel good—but they will not be good, or do good, because they are not embedded in the presence of the only God who is good. Art can be heroic. Music can be marvelous. Speeches can be moving. Ceremonies can be inspirational. But they will not be transformational unless God is present in the midst and is the focus of the worship.

It is the worship of God in Christ that changes us: reframes our perspectives; inspires us to lives of discipleship; and moves us beyond ourselves out into God's mission. Worship is not an end to itself; it is a beginning. It is an awakening for us to gather around the presence of God and to be moved to do Christ's work in the world. As we worship and sing of God, we are awakened from our cultural sleep; from the darkness of our minds; from the silliness of our superficialities; from the tragedy of our triviality; from the vulgarity of our arrogance; from the deception of empty words; and from the shame of secrets. In worship, hidden things are exposed; light is turned on our nightmares. That which is invisible becomes visible. The presence of God is made real. The reality of the Kingdom of God is confirmed to be present, here and now.

Somehow, the Apostle Paul, in his experience of Jesus, understood this, I think, in a unique and special way. Remember in Acts chapter 16, Paul and Silas are in the city of Philippi; they offend a number of the citizens and are rapidly beaten and thrown into prison? They refuse to allow the darkness of the Philippian jail to hold them back. The confinement of chains does not have the last word. They decide to worship God; they decide to sing hymns at midnight. They may have even sung this hymn, “Sleepers Awake!” for while their singing may have, in fact, kept the guards and other prisoners from sleeping. I’m sure the earthquake that happened was not the result of symphonic excellence or vocalist expertise; but, anchored by a Christ-centered base, it was in harmony with the Word of God, and in rhythm with the Holy Spirit. Their singing may have been flat or even a bit off-beat, but their audience of God was saying “Amen” and applauding. They sang and the earth shook; their worship rocked. It wasn’t refined; it wasn’t pretty. It wasn’t liturgically sophisticated. It was worship in the face of trouble; it was singing in the pain.

They did what Paul encourages all of us to do in the constraints of culture’s limitations and oppressions: “Be careful then how you live ... making the most of the time... sing to one another in songs and psalms and spiritual songs ... make melody in your hearts” in the midst of the trouble and the pain. Practice worship that calls you to live wisely. Fill yourselves up with the presence of God and not lesser substitutes. Give thanks to God, who is with you in the most miserable circumstances, in the most confusing of situations. Worship confronts us as we invite God to help us to examine our lives. We see Jesus at the podium with the baton, and we try to follow him in his measure, to align our ministry.

Many of the familiar hymns in our hymnal were written by John and Charles Wesley. They understood hymns to have a two-fold purpose in the life of the Christian: 1. to help us worship God; 2. to help us call one another to live healthy lives in the pattern of Jesus— mutual edification. Hymns lift us out of ourselves and into the presence of God. But they also free us to be present for each other. As we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, we help each other worship, and we teach one another—we hold one another accountable to the Word of God that resonates in the hymns.

There is a parallel passage in Colossians where Paul says this: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you fully. Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom. And, with gratitude in your hearts, sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God. 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.” Paul is consistent in his understanding of worship, music and singing. Do you see the connection between worship, grow and serve; between discipleship and living, as it flows out of singing? Our singing the songs, our worship of God, should have direct connection to how we grow together and how we serve together. We are not supposed to be sent out of here on our own. If we worship together, we should learn together and we should serve together. Our togetherness in worship should move us toward togetherness in learning... and in living... and in serving. Worship should teach us that we cannot do it alone. We need God and we need one another. In singing together, we set the foundation of life together and the direction of mission together. And the mutual life we have in Christ begins with the “alleluia” of worship to God. It moves through the mutual admonition of growing together and continues into the mutual opportunity to serve. One of the great juxtapositions, in an ironic way, of the word development in the New Testament, is the term for “one-another” which, in Greek, is “allelous.” The key Hebrew term from the Old Testament for praising God is “alleluia.” And so, there was a real sense in which, if you put the Hebrew and the Greek together, we become a people who are “allelous alleluia”—people who are in mutual worship of God.

The key to Reformed worship (and this is very important) is not how great our music is. It is the intimate integration of Word and music together. The wonderful gift of instrumental music is a gift of God; but well-integrated words with music, in the psalms and hymns that are built upon Scripture and how life flows from that, are a gift of Jesus himself, in the power of the Spirit. Jesus sang hymns with his apostles and disciples. And the apostles sang hymns with one another. And we have been encouraged to sing our hymns together because the Word of Christ is more strongly incarnated into our human thinking when we sing it. Whereas we might forget a sermon, we are likely to remember a hymn. Hymns and songs and psalms—they’re a key to our minds and hearts being transformed by the word of Christ filling us in memorable rhythm, melody and harmony.

Do you remember, during the Olympics, the U.S. Men’s Volleyball Team was coached by Hugh McCutcheon? Tragically and randomly, his father-in-law was killed and his mother-in-law was seriously

wounded in a senseless attack during the first week of the games. In an unexpected outcome, it was Hugh McCutcheon who coached his team—the U.S. Men's Volleyball Team—to an Olympic gold medal. And you knew the poignancy of the moment, when the whole team was standing there on the platform with the National Anthem of the United States of America playing, and the flag being raised. Off to the side, you could see Hugh McCutcheon in a serious reflection, on the edge of tears, knowing the price that had been paid for him to be able to coach that team. Now, I held it together pretty well emotionally until I saw the athletes, toward the end of the anthem, as they often do (it's an interesting moment) — where they have listened to the anthem up to this point, they start mouthing the words: "And the rockets' red glare, The bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night that our flag was still there. O say, does that star spangled banner yet wave o'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave!" And that is a powerful reminder to me that words and music, when met together in the passion of the moment that reflects the truth, are the way in which we human beings are lifted into a higher place in our sense of God's providential action in our lives.

In singing the songs of faith in Jesus Christ, we who are tempted by darkness are brought back into God's light. We, who have endured a terrible night, are lifted into the dawn of Christ's new life. And we are given the gift to be able to do this for one another, here today, in worship. So let our worship be mutual alleluia, an "allelous alleluia," so that we might teach, and admonish, and encourage one another to live in the love of God, the Word of Jesus Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let us pray. Now, O Lord Jesus Christ, may you move us from your Word into your sacrament, into your real presence. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.