



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

In Tune and In Time

SERMON BY REV. BRAD ROGERS ■ JULY 23, 2017

“*Merciful God*”—what a beautiful hymn with a beautiful message. “*Merciful God, abounding in love, faithful*” I love how that line begins each verse. You can be captivated by the way the melody carries the lyrics along? It is as though the arrangement of notes carries along the Word of God and enables it to rest in our hearts. That is one of the most compelling aspects of music. Music has a way of communicating the deep and complex truths of our world straight to our hearts. Music has a way of communicating the complex inner realities of our souls with the rest of the world. It’s a conduit that facilitates communication in and out of the heart.

As long as there have been cultures in the world, there have been songs in the hearts of the people. Though there is incredible stylistic diversity in music, it often serves the same purpose within the cultures that give rise to it. Simply put: music moves us. Sometimes music moves us physically. You know the experience of listening to a song where the rhythms cause your body to sway and you to clap. At other times, music moves us emotionally. Music can help us to be in touch with the emotional core of another, helping us resonate with the feelings that somebody else has experienced. Music can minister to us by uplifting our souls in dark times. For the church, music moves us spiritually. Music is a conduit that communicates the grace and love of God straight into our hearts. Historically, the best music has challenged and critiqued our prevailing ways of thinking. The same is true of how music moves us spiritually. Sometimes, our spiritual songs challenge our hearts and minds to conform to our faith in Christ.

When I listen to really good music, it enables me to tap into that part of my being that seeks truth and meaning and even excellence. Have you ever had the experience of listening to a song that stirs your imagination in such a way that you feel yourself probing the depths of truth and longing for more meaning?

The other day, I stumbled across an online video featuring one of my favorite musicians, Ben Folds, who is widely regarded as one of the major influences in contemporary music. He's a pianist who composes in the singer/song writer genre. His most recent album is a unique blend of pop and classical original works. After it was released in 2015, the album soared to the top of both the Billboard Classical and Classical Crossover charts. After 25 years of excellence in the music industry, Ben Folds was named as the first ever Artistic Advisor to the National Symphony Orchestra. Pretty incredible!

During the event announcing that Folds had been given this prestigious honor, he was given a rather daunting challenge. Standing underneath a massive projection screen that read "The Creative Brain," Folds was challenged to write a completely new song to be played with the National Symphony Orchestra—on the spot—in front of a live audience of nearly 2500 people. As if that weren't hard enough, he was given a 10-minute time limit in which to compose.

To prompt the creation of this entirely new song, Dr. Charles Limb, a leading researcher on the creative brain who introduced Folds, took suggestions from the audience for the tune, the time, and the lyrics of this new piece. First, he asked the audience for a key and the audience excitedly shouted a cacophony of keys. Dr. Limb said that he heard A minor. Then he asked for a tempo, and the audience nearly unanimously chose an upbeat one. Finally, he asked that the first line of the song to be chosen from the program for the evening.

To put the complexity of this task into perspective, this exercise would be analogous to my asking the congregation for a scripture passage, a world issue, and the denominational style of sermon you'd like to hear on a Sunday morning, and then having Steven, Doug, or me improvise a message on the spot. Can you imagine? We

will not be doing that this morning, or ever for that matter!

Ben Folds took the information provided by the audience, sat for a second behind a grand piano on stage, took a deep breath, and then began to play and hum. Almost immediately, he began to give the orchestra their marching orders. He said, "Cellos, here's your chord progression, and I want you to play like this..." and he demonstrated on the piano, as they played along. Next he said, "Winds and reeds; flutes, oboes, bassoons, clarinets, I want to hear this in E minor and concert G," and they played together. "First violins I want you to do this..." and he gave them instructions; then, "second violins I want you to go..." and he gave them instructions. "Now, let's try that all together," he said.

After about seven minutes, aware that he was running out of time, he said, "Basses, you know what to do. Straight 8's on this chord progression! And drums, I don't know, play whatever you want." And just like that, in front of the live audience, this creative genius was able to compose a two-and-a-half-minute piece to be played with the National Symphony Orchestra, using only the three simple suggestions of time, tune, and lyrics. Can you imagine the creativity and sheer brainpower it would take to accomplish this? To hear what no one else could hear and to get all the different sections of the orchestra playing in tune in and time? This doesn't even address the musical mastery that one must have to accomplish this.

When I see this level of genius reflected in music, it stirs my imagination and I cannot help but think of our Creative God. I imagine God as a conductor, and all of creation singing and playing His tune. I imagine God creating a symphony and we, as human beings, joining in the music of his composition. It's like Psalm 66:4 says, "*All of creation sings praise to you, they sing praises to your name.*" It's as though a "Divine Song" were being played by all creation. This raises an interesting question: can you hear the song of the divine and participate in the tune?

For thousands of years, people have heard this "Divine Song." Perhaps you've even heard the "Divine Song." Maybe it happened

in the context of a worship service in which the truth of God became remarkably clear to you and you sensed the Spirit's presence enveloping you. Maybe you heard the song sung through a person who was fierce with the Spirit; who, when you were with him, you felt as though you'd been in the presence of God. Maybe it was during a time in your life when tragedy struck and you weren't sure how you would make it through, but you sensed an undeniable inner strength. There's no other way to put it, except that it simply wasn't your own strength. Maybe it was a time when you were out in nature and it became clear that God's creative melody was humming in the beauty, the wonder and the complexity of his creation. The Great Melody of God is on display all around us. In these ways, we become aware that all creation is singing the praises of God.

The challenge we have is that there is so much noise pollution in our lives and we are so busy that we often miss it. When we are still and we quiet the noise of our lives, we can almost hear the still, small song that the Great Conductor is always directing.

From time to time in the Scriptures, the people of God were able to hear the "Divine Song" through their experiences with the living God. I find those encounters fascinating. Did you ever notice that in the pages of scripture those who became aware of God's presence in this way often broke into song themselves after having encountered the Divine?

Soon after the people of God were delivered from the hand of Pharaoh, Moses, Miriam, and all the Israelites broke out in song in Exodus 15:2. They joined in the song that is being sung by all creation,

The Lord is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God and I will praise him!

In Numbers 21, when the Israelites are wondering in the arid wilderness in desperate need of water, God directs them to a well and they begin to sing to God. In Deuteronomy 31, as Moses recommissions the people of God during the transition of power from himself

to his successor, Joshua, the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Moses and Joshua and together they sing of God's praises. Israel's greatest king, King David composes 73 songs about God's deliverance, which are reflected in the Book of Psalms. The Book of Revelation 4:8 depicts a beautiful vision of the throne room of God, where the angels are constantly singing "*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord is the Lord God almighty, who was and is and is to come!*" All the saints are in the presence of God, casting their crowns before him forever singing,

You are worthy, our lord and God to receive glory and honor and power for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being. Revelation 4:11

Time and time again, when the people of God encounter the greatness of God, they break out in song. They are moved by God and communicate that reality in the way that only music can help them. They join in the "Divine Song" which all of creation is humming in the ethereal throne room of God.

Could it be that when we sing hymns on Sunday mornings, we aren't just singing songs with our brothers and sisters in this room and in CenterPoint, but we are joining the worship of God that is ongoing through the angels and those who've gone before us to be with our God?

This morning, our Scripture passage is one of those songs from the Bible. It's a song that conveys the truth of God straight into our hearts; a song that moves us. These few verses may have been a hymn sung by early Christians. Prior to this passage, Paul had been encouraging the people to be like-minded. Essentially, he's telling them that they need to get along with one another. Why? For the sake of the gospel. The way to be of the same mind, one with another, is to have the same mindset as Christ. In response to that great call of God, Paul then writes the "Christ Hymn," Philippians 2:5-11.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his

own advantage;

*⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

*⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,*

*¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Can you hear why this passage is often referred to as the “Christ Hymn”? It’s poetic and lyrical with stunning interlinear parallelism. There is a steady crescendo that escalates to the last triumphant line. It builds like the “Hallelujah Chorus.”

Let’s think back to the challenge that was given to Ben Folds for a moment. The first piece of information that Dr. Limb asked for from the audience was a key in which the song would be written. In musical terms, a key is a group of notes complementary to one another which fall within a scale. From the key, musicians have in mind which notes form harmony and which will be dissonant. All the musicians must be playing in the same key if they are going to experience harmony in symphony.

There had been some dissonance, or some disharmony, in the community of Christ. Paul tells them they need to get on the same page, share the same thoughts, and be of the same mind in order to bring harmony back to the community. Paul insists that the key we must be playing in as Christians, if we are going to live in harmony with one another and so convey the gospel with the power that it ought to bear, is the key of Christ. If we share the mind of Christ, then we will naturally share the same mind with each other and thereby live in harmony. The “Christ Hymn” then goes on to demonstrate what that mind of Christ looks like. Though Christ was God,

he didn't exploit his power. Though he was leader of all, He became servant of all. Christ was humble and obedient.

Each of the attributes of Christ is like a note in the scale of the key of Christ. When God's people live in community with Christ, the combined witness to the world is an alluring symphony. The world hears the "Divine Song" through the faith community as a harmonious melody which brings glory to God. When one Christian is humble, another has a heart of service, still another gives sacrificially, while another demonstrates Grace, the harmony created becomes a part of God's plan that *"every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord."* God is the conductor, directing our community of faith and giving us, as the orchestra, our marching orders. When we follow Him, God's desire is that our communities are transformative. Paul says the Church needs to be of the same mind and in tune with God for the "Divine Song" to communicate the Truth of God to the hearts of the world. We, as individual Christians, need to be in tune with God, and we do so by being like Christ. Jesus is the melody of God incarnate.

Let's be honest with ourselves. There are times when our lives don't exactly seem in tune with God. It's possible to think we are playing all the right notes in our relationship with God, but we are really out of tune with Him. There are times when we talk a lot about God, but our lives seem distant from Him. In those times when we are out of tune with God, instead of creating harmony, we create dissonance in our homes and in our communities.

Have you ever known someone who upholds the truths of God, but has a tendency to be a little to self-righteous? Have you ever known someone who preaches one thing, but does another? Have you ever seen examples of scandal among pastors or priests? Each time we demonstrate these behaviors, instead of the love of Christ, instead of hearing the "Divine Song," the world hears sounds that are sour to the ears.

Before the National Symphony Orchestra plays a single note, all musicians must tune their own instruments. Otherwise, while technically

they may believe that they are playing all the right notes, the sounds produced are sour to the ear.

So too, Paul insists that we need to be in tune with God by having the mind of Christ. That's one reason why many have found that a morning prayer session or devotional is so foundational to their lives. It's an opportunity to tune up our instruments prior to entering the orchestra halls. We need to be in tune with God by taking on the mind of Christ.

After Dr. Limb asked the audience in the Kennedy Center what key they'd like to hear for the newly created song, he inquired about a tempo. The tempo of a song is how fast or how slow the song is. In order for the melodies to align with the supporting music, all the musicians need to be playing the same number of beats per minute, or tempo. The tempo ensures that everyone plays in time.

When I was in middle school and high school, I was a percussionist in the school band. The band played several concerts each year in an auditorium and on national holidays we participated in community parades. I used to love to march in those parades. As a drummer during a parade, I was one of the few people who is always playing. Percussionists are always playing during a parade because the band uses the cadence of the drums to stay in step with one another and so stay in time with the music. I remember watching a video of one of the parades that I marched in during high school and I noticed an interesting phenomenon. We were marching in the downtown area of Belvidere, Illinois (which isn't exactly a bustling metropolis) and in one section there are tall buildings on three sides. In that area, the cadence of the drums began to reflect off of the buildings creating echoes. For the drum section, this wasn't a big deal because we originated the sound; however, some band members were a significant distance from the drums. For them it became difficult to determine the real cadence from the echoes reflected off of the buildings. What the video revealed was that the further band members were from the origin of the cadence, the more out of step and out of time they were from each other. At the end of the song, I

remember hearing the drums stop and then a split second later the rest of the band stopped with the drums' echo.

The further we get from God's perfect timing and the further we are away from God, the further we are from the rhythms of godly living. We move out of touch—and out of time. We move further away from the origin; further out of time and out of step with God. As we move further away from the Source, we end up listening to what other people are saying and doing in order to stay in time, as opposed to watching the Great Conductor.

The “Christ Hymn” in Philippians 2 speaks of the reality that Jesus, who is eternally present with God, became a human being at a specific time in history. For God's plan to be accomplished there was pinpoint precision in His timing. Sometimes, you and I would rather either speed up God's timing or slow it down. But God is composing a great symphony which declares His grandeur to the world. For all the pieces of God's symphony to fit together, the musicians must stay in time with God. If we are going to stay in time with our Heavenly Father and create that beautiful symphony rather than the muddled chaos of being out of time with God, we are going to need to keep our eyes on the conductor.

How are you doing? Are you listening for that “Divine Song” which is humming throughout God's creation? Do you realize that you're actually playing a part in that “Divine Song” in the way that you play? God has an impact on how clearly the gospel will be proclaimed. It will either be a sweet symphony to the ears of the outside world or it will sound sour to them. Are you making strides to ensure that your instrument is in tune each day? When the world hears the song you are playing, do they hear God's harmony? Are you listening to the other musicians around you or are you keeping your eyes fixed on the Conductor?

May you come to see that all creation, in its complexity, its beauty and its wonder is singing a “Divine Song” proclaiming God's glory. May you come to take on the mind of Christ so that the song of your life is in tune with and in time with God's “Divine Song.”



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