

SINGING OUR FAITH  
Sermon Transcript  
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Nothing can bring people together or divide them like music. Everyone has his or her own particular taste in both sacred and secular music. Praise God for our diversity! Music is an important component of our worship.

We as United Methodist are a singing people. One thing we cannot deny is our singing heritage. Nothing is more integral to worship in the Methodist tradition than hymn singing. This morning we are going to look at several hymns and we are going to praise God by singing some of the great hymns of our faith.

Hymn tunes are the folk songs of the Christian faith. What exactly is a hymn? It is a musical form of sufficient simplicity and appeal that it can be sung without rehearsal. Typically hymns have melody, harmony, rhythm, and meter. The effect of hymns is powerful because two languages are employed – words and music. Hymnody is the study of hymns, which is the topic of this morning's sermon.

We sing hymns while we are alone, with other people, and during our worship services. It was once said that you could tell a Methodist was coming by his singing. This is because hymn singing has many values. I will lift up six of these:

1. **Jesus himself understood the value of singing hymns.** The gospels of Mathew (26:30) and Mark (14:26) state Jesus sang a hymn with his disciples immediately before his betrayal. The Apostle Paul in the book of Ephesians (5:19) exhorted the church at Ephesus to speak to each other "in psalms and hymns and spiritual song, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." In the book of Colossians (3:16), Paul also encouraged the church of Colossae to teach and admonish each other with "psalms and hymns and spiritual song."
2. **Through hymn singing Christians express their feelings and ideas.** Even though someone else wrote the words to a hymn, we can claim the hope, faith, and promise as our own. You know – when you are sad you sing sad songs, when you are in love you sing love songs. As believers we sing songs about our faith.

- 3. Through hymn singing Christians can tell others what they believe.** Charles and John Wesley, the founders of the Methodist Church, experienced this first hand while on a ship sailing from England to America. One evening they attended a vesper service of German Moravian Christians. John described what happened: *In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, wherein we were mentioning the power of God, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the deck, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans all looked up and without interruption calmly sang on. I asked of them afterwards, "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God no." I asked "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied mildly, "No, our women and children were not afraid to die."* During this frightening experience, the Moravians expressed their calm faith by singing. Their faithful experience, the Moravians expressed their calm faith by singing. Their faithful witness made a huge impression on John and Charles Wesley.
- 4. Through hymn singing Christians are bound in closer fellowship.** We feel connected to our brothers and sisters in Christ when we sing hymns of the faith. A lot of us probably have some memories of singing "Pass it on" around a bonfire at church camp. I feel the urge to reach out and hold someone's hand when I sing "They Will Know We Are Christians By Our Love." When a group of Christians sing with vitality the same melody and rhythm, think and feel the same ideas and emotions during the act of common praise, it becomes inevitable that each will be drawn closer in spirit to his and her neighbor. We cease to be isolated individuals. We become more completely members of the body of Christ. As Deitrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "it is the voice of the Church that is heard in singing together. It is not you that sings, it is the Church that is singing, and you, as a member of the Church, may share in the song." Thus all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church."
- 5. Through hymn singing Christians are instructed in the fundamentals of their faith.** The hymnal could be called a commentary on the Holy Scripture and on Christian experience. Almost every facet of our faith has been expressed through hymns...how to live, how to serve, who God is, what God is like...it is all there.

6. **Through hymns Christians are sustained in daily life.** The other five values are realized mostly in corporate worship. In daily life, we can find strength and comfort by singing words and melodies from memorized hymns. I heard a story told at a church musician's workshop several years ago that has stuck with me. A youth choir director from Tennessee told about a teenager in his youth choir. She was rock climbing when she slipped and fell. Whatever harness or apparatus you use when you rock climb did not perform the way it was designed. She was dangling on a ledge and had to support herself by her own strength to keep from plunging to what would surely be her death. Rescuers were summoned, but it took quite a while (what I am sure must have seemed like an eternity) to reach her. Finally she was rescued. When asked how she was able to stay calm and sustain the strength to hold on for so long, she replied that all the time she was suspended she sang hymns that brought her peace and comfort and reminded her of God's strength and presence with her. OK, now I have chill bumps. Isn't this what we all want? We want to feel God's presence with us at all times. We want our children and parents and grandparents and friends to all have the calm assurance that God cares for them and is with them during trials and struggles.

Aside from hymns taken from the Bible itself, the earliest hymn still in use today is probably "O Gladsome Light." Written before the fourth century, Basil the Great (329-379) referred to it as already a "rather old hymn." Its composer is unknown. It is sometimes called, "The Candle-lighting Hymn" because of its use in the Greek Church at vesper services celebrating God's gift of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Versions of this printed text dates from the twelfth century. The original Greek text was unhymned and unmetred. (Note: At this point the congregation sang "O Gladsome Light").

The tradition of Christian hymns in the English language is closely tied to Protestantism. Protestant hymns range from the Reformation organ pieces of J. S. Bach to the American folk hymns found in The Sacred Harp. Martin Luther composed a number of hymns in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, reportedly borrowing some of their melodies from popular tavern drinking songs of the period.

One of the most famous and prolific hymn writers of all time was Charles Wesley, brother of John Wesley the Father of Methodism. Charles wrote some 6,000 hymns and it is reported he wrote 3 hymns a day. After more than 200 years they are still being sung throughout the world. Fifty-one of his hymns are in our current United Methodist Hymnal. Charles' greatest gift to Methodism was his hymns, and they are regarded as among the finest ever written.

The congregation "lustily" sang one of Charles Wesley's most beloved hymns and the first one in the hymnal, "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing". This song was inspired by a chance remark of an influential Moravian leader called Peter Bohler, who expressed his spiritual joy this way: "Oh, Brother Wesley, the Lord

has done so much for my life. Had I a thousand tongues I would praise Christ Jesus with every one of them!" Charles Wesley himself recommended that every Christian should sing this hymn "on the anniversary of one's conversion."

I will conclude by speaking of the hymn "Shall we Gather at the River", which was originally written as a poem entitled, "Mutual Recognition of the Hereafter." The text reflect apocalyptic visions from Revelations 22:1-2. *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life. Bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*