“Singing in Many Tongues”
A Sermon delivered by Rev. W. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
June 9th, 2019/Pentecost Sunday from Acts 2:1-14 & Eph. 5:6-21

The earliest reflection on Christian worship, by the Roman Empire, is found in a letter from Pliny the Younger to emperor Trajan in 111 A.D. Pliny was governor of Asia Minor, the same region as the churches to whom Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians. Pliny was called to enforce an edict prohibiting political associations, and the church was considered one of the most dangerous political groups, because they pledged their ultimate loyalty to God and refused to bend the knee to Caesar. Pliny informed the Emperor that Christianity was endangering people of every age and rank and had spread through cities and rural villages. He accused them of depraved and excessive superstition, and said, “whatever creed they professed, their inflexible obstinacy and stubbornness was deserving of punishment.” This proves nothing except that the early Christians may have been Baptists.

After torturing two deaconesses for information, Pliny wrote, “They asserted they were in the habit of meeting before dawn on a stated day and singing alternately a hymn to Christ as to a god, and they bound themselves by an oath...to abstain from theft, robbery and adultery...and then to meet together again for a meal.” Pliny’s reflections on worship remind us that the church was born as a people who sing together, and the followers of Jesus have been singing alternately and alternatively from the very beginning. While Pliny was probably referring to the back and forth, call and response style of early chant music, the word ‘alternative’ also describes what this community of singers was—an alternative to the Empire.

Pliny’s job was to keep this community quiet and prevent them from singing, because their songs were a threat to imperial power. Like the Freedom Songs of the Civil Rights movement or the protest songs of the 60s counterculture, every song the church sang was an alternative to the forces of oppression, injustice, and death. Every song was a call to become the beloved community Jesus envisioned of love, goodness, peace, and life. The church’s vocation as a singing community is summed up in a prayer by Walter Brueggemann, “God, we are people who must sing you, for the sake of our lives. You are a God who must be sung by us, for the sake of your majesty and honor. So, we thank you, for lyrics that push us past our reasons, for melodies that break open our givens, for cadences that drive us beyond all our safe places, for tones and tunes that open our lives beyond control and our futures beyond despair. We thank you for the long parade of mothers and fathers who have sung you deep and true; We thank you for the good company of artists, poets, musicians, cantors, and instruments that sing for us and with us, toward you. We are witnesses to your mercy and splendor; and we will not keep silent...ever again.”
It may seem unorthodox to talk about singing on Pentecost Sunday, but in his letter to the Ephesians Paul attached the practice of singing with the gift of the Holy Spirit. He said, “Do not get drunk, but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God for everything in the name of Jesus.” Of course, the first thing we thirsty Christians focus on is Paul’s prohibition of drunkenness. I hope you’ll join me in taking that part metaphorically. It’s like the joke about the pastor who visited a businessman named Mr. Johnson who produced the finest peach brandy. Mr. Johnson told the Pastor he would make a sizable donation to the church if the pastor would drink some peach brandy and admit it publicly. The problem was his congregation was opposed to drinking. But the pastor couldn’t pass up the offer. The next Sunday Mr. Johnson visited the church ready to donate, and when the preacher saw him, he realized he’d have to say something, so he said: “I see Mr. Johnson is here with us this morning. I’d like to thank him publicly for his hospitality this week. Especially for the peaches he gave me and for the ‘spirit’ in which they were given.”

The effects that liquid spirits and God’s Spirit have on us are often contrasted in scripture. On the first Pentecost, many in the crowd who heard the Galilean’s speaking in their own languages thought they were drunk, but Peter said, “We are not drunk but filled with the Holy Spirit.” The similarity between being drunk and filled with the Spirit is that something inside of us has overtaken our minds and bodies—dulled our inhibitions so we can express ourselves more boldly and truthfully. Drunkenness is a metaphor. Paul used this image to compare those who are sleep walking like zombies in the dark with those walking in the light. He contrasted the inebriated nighttime walk of a fool; drunk on worldly power and delusions of nostalgia, with those who wisely walk in the light of God bearing the fruit of goodness, justice, and truth.

Many people in our world, our nation, and our churches today are sleep walking through life like zombies—glued to their phones and devices like insects caught in the light of bug zapper. Many have stopped participating in organized religion, and in so doing they have stopped singing together. Instead, we are stumbling through life drunk on the spirit of nostalgia about how great things were in the past, filled with sentimentality about glory days gone by. Others are so anxious about the future and the crisis that might be coming they are unaware of what is happening right in front of them. Paul has a song for all who are drunk, asleep or lifeless; a song that calls us all to stop pining for the past, or worrying about the future, but to live in the present.

The lyrics to the song Paul called us to sing are instructive: “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Paul was singing, “Wake up and rise up, it’s time to shine! It is time to stop walking in drunkenness, darkness and death, and start walking in the light of Spirit—the spirit of love, life, and light.” Paul has an antidote to the foolishness of those who deal secretly, in shadows, drunk on power or nostalgia. He says, “Wake up, lift your voices, sing together, let your light shine, and everything in the darkness will be exposed and transformed by the light of goodness, justice, and truth.” The solution to all our problems is to sing together.
In *Braving the Wilderness*, Brené Brown offers the concept of “collective effervescence,” developed by sociologist Emile Durkheim, as a solution to our current malaise. Collective effervescence is the experience of connection, communal emotion, and sacredness that happens when we take part in something bigger than ourselves. It can happen when we are cheering at a Panthers game or singing at Tom Petty concert. It can happen when we sing together in worship. We are caught up in a transcendent collective experience of profound connection with God, one another and the universe. Researchers claim that regular experiences of *collective effervescence* fill our lives with a sense of meaning, social connection, and a decreased sense of loneliness. This is what Paul was saying to the Ephesians. If you want to walk out of the drunken shadow of nostalgia, anxiety, and death you have to sing together as a people of faith!

As a church we have not only sung together in this sanctuary, we have sung beyond these walls. We sang Freedom Songs together with our African-American brothers and sisters on a race pilgrimage through the Deep South. We sang “Somebody’s hurting my neighbor” outside Stewart Detention Center on an immigration pilgrimage. We sang “Amazing Grace” at the bedsides of our beloved members as they were dying, and we hummed Brahms’s *Lullaby* whenever a child was born. As St. Hildegard of Bingen once said: “Don’t let yourself forget that God’s grace rewards those who never slip, but also those who bend and fall. So, sing! The song of rejoicing softens hard hearts. It makes tears of godly sorrow flow from them. Singing summons the Holy Spirit. Happy praises offered in simplicity and love lead the faithful to complete harmony, without discord. So, don’t [ever] stop singing.”

The church was born singing as an alternative to the death and drunkenness of the Empire. Our faith finds expression in song because there are things about the mystery of God and the universe that cannot be expressed in the spoken word. To walk in the light and be filled with the Spirit, all we have to do is open our mouths and sing: “Wake up, rise up, and shine!” We sing the mission of the church—the mission of love, life, and light—goodness, justice, and truth. There is no single style or genre of music that the church sings. Paul commanded the church to sing a variety of music: psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs—not either/or, or one over another, but all the songs. And when you do, he said, don’t sing quietly—sing from the core of your being, make music from the depths of your heart, and give thanks to God for everything you’ve been given. It is only in our openness to sing each other’s songs that the church will be born anew today, like the first Pentecost, when tongues of fire fell from and the church sang in the songs of all the nations.

Poet Malcolm Guite said, “Today we feel the wind beneath our wings, the hidden fountain flows and plays, the church draws breath at last and sings, as every flame becomes a tongue of praise. This is the feast of fire, air, and water poured out and breathed and kindled into earth. The earth herself awakens to her maker and is translated out of death to birth. The right words come today in their right order and every word spells freedom and release. Today the gospel crosses every border all tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace. Today the lost are found in God’s translation. Whose mother-tongue is Love, in every nation.”
The church cannot be the church without singing. It is what we do. It is who we are. It is who we were born to be. We sing for the sake of our lives because our God is a God who must be sung. We sing in the mother-tongue of love, because love has the power to outlast all the pain the world can throw our way. If we can sing, we can survive. If we can sing, we can heal. If we can sing, we can live another day. If we can sing, we can come together. If we can sing, we can wake up from our drunken stupor, walk out of the shadows, and rise from the dead. If we sing, we can be the church. If we can sing from the bottom of our souls, and mean what we sing, and live what we sing—then we can be transformed by the words we express and the melody of our hearts, and our church will be filled with the Spirit of God. So, do not keep silent and don’t ever stop singing, but wake up, rise-up, and shine!

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v Malcolm Guite, “Our Mother Tongue is Love.”