

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 24, 2016
Sermon Title: In Celebration of Music: To God Be the
Glory
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Music Litany

Music Litany

Pastor: An evil spirit tormented King Saul. So his attendants searched for someone who could play the HARP so that the King would feel better. They found David from Bethlehem. He knew how to play the harp; he was a brave man and a warrior. So David came to Saul and entered his service. Whenever the evil spirit came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.
(1 Samuel 16:14-23)

Reader: I will pray with my spirit, I will pray with my mind. I will sing with my spirit, I will sing with my mind.
(1 Corinthians 14:15)

Congregation: Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to God.
(Psalm 81:1)

Reader: Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and MAKE MUSIC in your heart to the Lord.
(Ephesians 5:19)

Congregation: Is any one of you in trouble? Then pray. Is any one of you happy? Then SING SONGS of praise. *(James 5:13)*

Reader: I will make MUSIC to the Lord. *(Judges 5:3)*
I will extol God with MUSIC and SONG. *(Psalm 95:2)*
I will burst into jubilant SONG with MUSIC. *(Psalm 98:4)*
I will make MUSIC with all my soul. *(Psalm 108:1)*

Congregation: SING to the Lord a new SONG! *(Psalm 96:1)*
Burst into SONG, O mountains. *(Isaiah 49:13)*

ALL: Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Praise him with TRUMPET sound; praise him with LUTE and HARP! Praise him with TAMBOURINE and dance; praise him with STRINGS and PIPE! Praise him with clanging CYMBALS; praise him with loud clashing CYMBALS! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!
(Psalm 150)

Prince died on Thursday. For those of us of a certain age, the reality of mortality first hit us when we began losing our rock 'n' roll heroes. The plane crash that took Buddy Holly and Ritchie Valens led to the words that say it all, "the day the music died," in Don McLean's "American Pie."

Before long, we were dealt the death of Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison. They were young when we were young. As time went on, we began to lose musicians of long standing, people whose lives and music ran right along side our lives. Elvis, Michael Jackson, David Bowie, and now Prince.

We remember albums and songs and concerts and lyrics, and they are all tied to some specific moment in our lives. Prince had a special place because there was not only a brilliance to him, but also a graciousness, a joy, even his own quiet faith. Fact is, music and musicals get into our heads and our hearts.

Music does that to us. Alida and I have been blessed to visit some of the great places on earth, the greatest art, the greatest food, stirring history rooted in faith. And we loved it all. But ask us about the cello concert we heard in Paris, when Gautier Capuçon took the whole concert hall to another world, leaving us breathless. Or the world premier of a cello orchestra piece in Venice so stunning that we could not leave the concert hall without touching the composer. Such is the power of music. Think of your own life, the concerts, the songs, the records, the musicals, how you loved them and remember them.

So I had this great idea. Let's have a really special worship service loaded with music, use some of our favorite musicians and singers, doing it in the

middle of January, and give us all a midwinter treat. So we did, but God sent a blizzard that weekend, half the music couldn't get here, most of the congregation couldn't get here, and yet it was still so powerful, so inspiring, people begged us to do it again in good weather.

I call this "my shortest sermon ever" because I'm not really the preacher today. When we developed the "sports worship" model a few years ago, and when it evolved into the "Family Room," we decided to move away from the standard sermon—me, standing up here preaching for 17-20 minutes.

Instead, the sermon became a dialog, an interview between me and several guests. Our very first guest was an 85-year-old man, Vito Montelli, the legendary basketball coach at St. Joseph's, the winningest high school coach in New England. Later we had the Fairfield Prep football coach. From our church, we've had outstanding athletes who excelled in college football, soccer, swimming, lacrosse; we've had our own high school stars. Wrestlers, runners, fencers, and volleyball, lacrosse, and field hockey players.

At one service, we switched the focus to business, interviewing Cindy Bigelow and Brad Orben. In every interview, we learned lessons that tied together faith and sports, faith and business, faith and perseverance, faith and effort, faith and family, faith and excellence.

It turns out that so much that makes you strong in sports or strong in business makes you strong as a Christian. Indeed, when I asked the Fairfield Prep football coach what he wanted in a high school football player, he took his answer straight out of Jesus's mouth: "I want players who will love their teammates as much as they love themselves and will take responsibility for them." That's preaching. He took Scripture; he took an example from life, from work, from sports, and wove it all together.

Today, we thought to do the same with music. Our music and our musicians—they are the sermon. As with any sermon, there's a foundation in Scripture, and our litany ties together a whole bunch of verses from different parts of the Bible, all of which make the same points: music is good for you, you should do more of it, God enjoys it too. The litany begins with an old story from King David's life, except this takes place when he is still a kid. Israel had a mean king, Saul, rage filled, unstable, jealous, violent. Someone had the bright idea to get some music for him, and in those days the harp was really popular, the guitar of the times. Young David was good at it. He was the singer/songwriter of his day, and the Bible tells us that whenever King Saul lost his cool, David did his music, and Saul got peaceful. That probably gave rise to the famous saying, "music hath charms to sooth

the savage breast, to soften rocks or bend a knotted oak," which, by the way, comes from a play in merry old England in 1697.

The point's the same: music can touch us deeply, transform us, help us, inspire us. That's why the Bible is full of exhortations to "Praise the Lord, sing to the Lord, make music to the Lord," crescendoing with that marvelous Psalm 150, which invites us to "Praise God" with a whole host of instruments: trumpets, tambourines, strings, flute, clashing cymbals, and dancing. Why? Because it's fun. People like it. God likes it!

Every Easter, our early service ends with Psalm 150. In case you don't know, the early service is led by our Confirmation class. So it's 7 AM, a bunch of 8th-graders are running the service, so we range from bleary-eyed to raucous, all mixed together. Then, at the end, Alida brings out a box of, yes, tambourines, cymbals, percussion, bongos, kazoos, distributes them among the people; and as we read together Psalm 150, we create this cacophony of "joyful noise," which is exactly what the Bible says, "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord. Come before God with singing." Why? Because it's fun. We enjoy it. God likes it too.

That's my brief sermon. The rest of today's sermon is music and musicians, letting us hear their "joyful noise unto the Lord," enough to "soothe the savage breast, soften rocks, and bend a knotted oak."