

Remembering What You Sing

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Philippians 2: 1-13

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I don't know if time travel is possible. I will leave that up to the physicists to decide. But if it is, wouldn't it be amazing if you could hop in a time machine and go to any time your heart desired? If tomorrow all of the sudden you read in *The Repository* that they were coming out with time machines that you could order on Amazon, I wonder if you would buy one and where you would go. Would you go back to the 50s like Marty McFly did in *Back to the Future*? Would you visit a time centuries from now when hopefully we have put an end to all war and all disease and harnessed technology for good rather than for evil? One thing I am sure of, though is that there will never be a time machine quite like the music that you love. A song that lives in your heart may be a time machine that can only move us in one direction, namely the direction of the past, but there will never be a time machine quite like it. Whenever I hear one of the songs that was popular when I was about fourteen I am suddenly fourteen again. I am back in high school with the school bell ringing summoning me to class. I am there with the ear piercing whistle that hung around the gym teacher's neck. I am there with the sounds of bubble gum popping in the halls and sneakers squeaking on the tile floor. For me, no time machine, however advanced, could ever hold a candle to a song by Crowded House.

And why is that? What is it about Crowded House singing *Don't Dream It's Over*, or The Beatles singing *Hey Jude* or Elvis singing *Love Me Tender* that suddenly takes you back in time? Well, I don't know. But if you have ever had that experience yourself, you have discovered the power that music has in our lives and the central role it has in our lives.

I think every now and then we need to be reminded of the importance of music in our lives because I think that there are a lot of people in the church who see the music of worship as nothing more than window dressing and they think the real reason we should show up to worship is to hear the spoken message. Those who think that way could be right, but they are not very good Presbyterians. Presbyterians and Reformed Christians have always recognized the power of music in our lives. I think that is largely why John Calvin thought that music in church should be on a tight leash. Calvin didn't believe there should be any musical instruments in church, and that only the words of scripture should be sung. These strike us as strange views today, but he said these things I think because he knew that there were few things that can move us as much as music, that can carry our emotions away as much as music, and so he saw music as being highly dangerous if it wasn't tightly controlled.

And those who don't recognize the importance of music will also have a terrible time, a terrible time understanding this New Testament passage today. When we begin this passage, Paul is talking to the church in Philippi and he tells them to have the same mind and to share the same love. Why does he say that? He probably says that because there is some fighting and bickering going on in this church. Toward the end of his letter, in fact, he talks about two women named Euodia and Syntyche who are fighting with each other. Who knows why they're fighting? Maybe they both had some kind of job to do and one of the two women felt that the other one wasn't pulling her weight. Maybe one of them did a favor for the other one and she felt the favor should be returned and it never was. Who knows? But whatever caused them to fight, Paul tells them to change their attitude. He tells them to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but exercise humility by having the same attitude that was in Christ

Jesus. And Jesus, Paul says, was in the form of God, but did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. But he was found in human likeness and he humbled himself by taking the form of a slave and Paul says Jesus was obedient to God to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, he says God highly exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above all names, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Now I give you this background, but if you go on line and you read different sermons and different commentaries about this passage, they all say the same thing. They all say that Paul is giving the Philippians a set of instructions or directions, and instructions or directions which set up Jesus as a model of humility, a model for the Philippians to imitate. Now, I don't mean to be overly critical of people in this profession who preach for a living and who write commentaries for a living. These are not easy things to do and I know people in this profession well enough to know that most of them, the vast majority of them in fact are dedicated to doing God's work. But when I read something like that, if I didn't know any better, I would think the bible must be torturously dull and dreadfully boring. When I read these sermons and commentaries I almost can't blame people for not knowing their bible and not wanting to read their bible. I wouldn't want to read it either if that's what I thought it said.

If you want to know what Paul is saying it may be helpful to begin with the fact that when Paul wrote to the Philippians he wrote to a group who is just what I said they were. A church. And by a church I mean just that, a church. Now, the Philippians didn't do church in the exact way that you and I do church. For one thing, they didn't have big spacious buildings like this with signs out front. There were no church buildings. They met in each other's homes. They

didn't wear robes. They didn't have the gospels yet. But in just about every other way, in Philippi they had church just like we do at Northminster. They had worship with all the elements that we have including hymns. And what Paul is doing in this passage is he is quoting from a hymn. He is quoting a hymn that they sing, and he is telling them to remember what they sing. Now, I don't know how this hymn went. I don't know what it sounded like. In fact, no one does. The only way we even know that it is a hymn is because if you look at the original Greek you can tell that there is a certain rhythm and rhyme to the words. But, you know, it doesn't matter how it sounded, but what is important is that they knew how it sounded, and they knew as well as we know that you can't ever sing what you don't feel. Oh, you might be able to go through the motions if you want to call that singing, but when it's all said and done, do you really think you can sing what you don't feel? That's why whenever I hear Crowded House , I once again have all those feelings I had when I was in ninth grade. I have all the feelings I associate with that music. Try singing "Zippidy Doo Dah, Zippidy Aye" when you're in a terrible mood. How well do you think you can do it? And so what Paul is saying to Euodia and Syntyche is "You know what? I know you two are fighting and I know you two are bickering and I know you two can't get along, but I also know that you sing this hymn. I know you sing this hymn about Christ who was in the form of God and who humbled himself and took the form of a slave. And so here's what I'm going to tell you. You are either going to have to get along with each other and have the same attitude as Christ, or you're going to have to give up singing this hymn you love, because you can't do both."

The bible even tells us that you can't sing what you don't feel. Read Psalm 137 some time. Read the words *by the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we*

remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? What are these words saying? They are saying when we were in the despair of having been taken from Jerusalem, having been taken from our home and living as exiles in Babylon, our captors mocked us saying "Sing one of your happy songs of Jerusalem. Sing one of your songs of joy." But instead we just sat there and hung up our harps on the willow trees because we cannot sing the Lord's song when we're living in a foreign land. You think you can sing what you don't feel?

Years ago, when I was in Seminary, I remember one time Walter Brueggeman who is wiser than I will ever be, told me that we can say things in hymns that we cannot say with the spoken word. For years, I wondered what in the world he meant. What does that mean, "we can say things in hymns that we cannot say in the spoken word"? Well, I finally figured out what he meant. He didn't mean that we can't quote hymns of course. What he meant was that what we say in hymns doesn't have the same meaning when we say it in the spoken word. And if you believe that, then do you really believe that Paul is just telling the Philippians just to be like Jesus? If so, then this sermon is a waste of time because this passage isn't too interesting. He is saying that of course, but he's also saying a lot more than that. He's saying remember what you sing. Remember that song you sing about Jesus who doesn't put himself first, who doesn't put his own interests first. In fact, he never did. Remember that song about Jesus which tells us he humbled himself and lived his life like a slave. Remember, you love that song. All of you love that song. And you love it because you believe it. That's who you are.

I want to close by asking you a simple question. It is a question that we might say is a Philippians question. What are the things we sing in here that you love? What are the things we sing in here that take you back in time to a different era, or that you would insist on singing every single Sunday if you could? You sing them because that's who you are, and that's what you really believe. You sing them because if we were to dig down beneath all your hopes and fear and dreams, all your doubts and wishes and all that stuff on the surface, we would find that this is who you are at the core. Do you believe that? Well, if you do, then when you leave this place today and go out into the world, remember who you are. Remember who you are. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.