

Title: God's Word and Our Response**Text: Colossians 3:16-17****A Brief Message preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.****Sunday, May 17, 2009 (Arts Appreciation Sunday)****First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

The other day, at our program planning meeting for the coming program year, we were sharing our spiritual journeys with each other. Unlike most of the staff, I was not raised in the church. For some reason, unknown to me, my parents did not take us to Sunday school except for one brief season in our life as a family. However, I was not devoid of spiritual influence.

My grandmother, we called her “Nana,” was a Christian Science Practitioner. She was like some of our Spiritual Directors who helped people practice the Christian Science expression of faith.

I have fond memories of visiting Nana’s home, usually on a Friday or Saturday evening so many parents could have a night out with each other. The big treat for my sister and I was to sleep in Nana’s bed with her, and it was there that I got to observe her helping other people as they would call in the middle of the night, troubled in their spirits, needing the assurance of their faith which my grandmother would help them practice.

My earliest faith memory is of a song. My grandmother would sing it over the phone to her clients as a way to soothe their troubled spirits. It goes like this:

O gentle Presence, peace and joy and power;
O light divine that knows each waiting hour.
Thy love divine has led us in the past.
Be thou our vision while life shall last.

It has been over 55 years since I last slept in Nana’s bed, yet that song has stayed with me all of my life. Before I had committed my life to Christ, my faith was being nurtured by a grandmother who loved to sing. Even after I discovered that Christian Science was not an

expression of faith that was meaningful for me, the song is still comforting. Perhaps you have a song like that. Most of us do. *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me; Glorious things of thee are spoken; Holy, Holy, Holy*: our hymnal is full of songs which have nurtured our faith before we understood what the faith was about. They are the songs that someone taught you, and when you sing them, you remember the relationship; or you remember a time in your life when that song captured your sense of something holy sustaining you.

Scripture is full of references to the importance of music in the life of a people of faith. The Psalms are the places that immediately come to mind. Psalm 100 reminds us that we are to make a joyful noise unto the Lord. Psalm 150 speaks of music at the heart of worship. However, there are more obscure verses which remind us of the importance of music in the life of the faith community. For example, II Chronicles speaks of Jehoshaphat appointing a choir to sing and had them go before the armies of Israel to sustain them in their battle (II Chronicles 20:18-21).

Brian Lowery has reflected on the role of music and scripture. He says that most of us would agree that singing worship songs in our gatherings and listening to others like our choirs and our soloists singing to us is important. However, he wonders if we know just how important those songs are to our growth as believers. He cited an article in the *New York Times* entitled "In One Ear and Out the Other," where the author, Natalie Angier, examines the limited power of human memory. She points out that while we can't quite seem to remember the birthday of a loved one, we can't quite forget every word of the *Gilligan's Island* theme song. She wondered why that was, and as she did her research she found that if you add a little music to something, it's more likely to be remembered. That's how the brain is wired to work. Listen to her analysis:

Though scientists used to believe that short- and long-term memories were stored in different parts of the brain, they have discovered that what really distinguishes the lasting from the transient is how strongly the memory is engraved in the brain.... The deeper the memory, the more readily and robustly an ensemble of like-minded neurons will fire.

This process, of memory formation by neuronal entrainment, helps explain why some of life's offerings weasel in easily and then refuse to be spiked. Music, for example. "The brain has a strong propensity to organize information and perception in patterns, and music plays into that inclination," said Michael Thaut, a professor of music and neuroscience at Colorado State University. ...

A simple melody with a simple rhythm and repetition can be a tremendous mnemonic device. "It would be a virtually impossible task for young children to memorize a sequence of 26 separate letters if you just gave it to them as a string of information," Dr. Thaut said. "But when the alphabet is set to the tune of the ABC song with its four melodic phrases, preschoolers can learn it with ease."

In other words, the hymns or choruses we sing—which combine Scriptural truths with moving melodies—teach us things that won't easily be forgotten. That should probably give us pause—pause to reflect on the value of what we have in the hymnals tucked away in our pews; pause to revisit what is being projected on the screens that line the front of our worship auditoriums; pause to remember that God has given us a powerful tool in music and its potent relationship to human memory. [Brian Lowery, managing editor of Preaching Today.com source: Natalie Angier, "In One Ear and Out the Other," *www.nytimes.com* (3-17-09)]

When the church was still young, the apostle Paul wrote this wonderful passage we have used as our focus for this morning. *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and*

admonish one another in all wisdom. In other words, the Word of God is to be at the center of our life together. Without it, we are little more than a club gathering together to do good works. With it, lives are sustained in the midst of situations that seem intolerable. People make incredible decisions to do things they never thought they could do. The word of God is the most powerful tool we have to discover the will of God for our individual lives and for our life together.

However, he also implores them to sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs to God. Why? He didn't have the neuroscience to back him up. He knew from experience that singing is a powerful way to get the Word of God down deep into our brains and into our souls so that we can be empowered to do great things for God.

So even if you can't sing, you can make a joyful noise unto the lord. And as you sing, let the words and the music lift you to a new place; the place of faith in the One who created you, sustains you, and gives you power to live your life to the full. Amen.