



May 2016 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

Throughout 2016 I invite you to reflect with me on the theme of “Practicing Our Faith” as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group, choir rehearsal and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Dorothy Bass has edited an excellent resource published several years ago by Jossey-Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, which I will be using as a primary resource. Together with Don Richter, Dorothy Bass has also edited a second book, *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, published by Upper Room Books, which is also an excellent resource. Each article will include a Scripture reference, thematic reflection, questions for consideration, and a prayer.

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*It is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing,
and you, as a member...may share in its 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.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

Singing Our Lives – Part 1

Our four children, then quite young, learned to sing a set of ritual songs. First, they would gather in a circle and teach one another, clapping and singing. Then one of them might suggest using a skipping rope and they would, one after another, slip inside the whirling rope for a few dancing steps before darting away. Then one would suggest a band and instruments would be created: plastic pails serving as a drum set, a broom becoming an electric guitar, a large cardboard box transforming into an amazing keyboard.

That dancing, singing, shared music making image has come back to me many times as I have thought of matters of worship. That circle of song and movement, with its delight and physical energy, its formal, ritual character marked by surprising improvisation, remains for me an

image of vitality and delight. This is but one reminder of the truth that human beings have always sung at play and at work, on festive and solemn occasions, in joy and in grief.

The act of singing together is deeply and indelibly human. When we sing, words are given greater range and power than when we speak. Something is shared in singing that goes beyond the words alone. This something has taken shape over many centuries in a practice that expresses our deepest yearning and priceless joy: the practice of singing our lives.

There is something about us that needs to make music, something that insists on song. It is not surprising then that music and song are so closely linked with the praise of divinity. As Saint Augustine observed long ago, whoever sings “prayers twice,” in music as well as text. From its very origin, the Christian community sang. In the New Testament, Paul’s letters are punctuated by doxologies, hymn fragments, and references to the practice of singing in worshipping assemblies. In writing to the church at Colossae, he joins singing to teaching and admonition, wisdom and the Word (Colossians 3:16).

The Christian church was born singing the songs of ancient Israel, the synagogue, and the Greco-Roman world. Psalms and canticles formed the heart of prayer and the music of the earliest Christian assemblies. Luke’s Gospel barely gets through the second chapter without bursting into song four times: Mary sings that her soul magnifies the Lord, Zechariah sings blessing to the Lord of Israel, the angels sing “Glory to God in the highest,” and Simeon sings a farewell song of peace. Each of these songs became regular parts of Christian daily prayers within the first two centuries. Saint Augustine, writing in the fourth century, could observe: “Apart from those moments when the scriptures are being read or a sermon is preached, when the bishop is praying aloud or the deacon is speaking the intention of the litany of community prayers, is there any time when the faithful assembled are not singing?”

We continue to sing these songs from Luke’s Gospel, as well as many other songs both ancient and new. We continue to sing not alone, but in union with the whole creation and with our sisters and brothers through the ages. The gathering of a community of faith to sing praises to God seems such a simple act, and it has been going on for over two millennia. But we should not take this practice for granted. It needs to be learned and nurtured and taught.

Read and Reflect: Colossians 3:16

Discuss and Reflect:

What in this reading leads you to say, “I wonder about...”, or, “I noticed...”

Consider sharing (and singing) a song from childhood that is part of your faith tradition. What is the most powerful memory the song evokes? What does it say about the faith of your childhood? Are there connections to the faith of your adulthood?

Reflect on the various ways in which music is sung in worship.

Comment on the following: *“The gathering of a community of faith to sing praises to God seems such a simple act, and it has been going on for over two millennia. But we should not take this practice for granted. It needs to be learned and nurtured and taught.”*

Pray together: *Maker of creation's choir, you sing the Song of Love to us. Breathe your Spirit into our singing until the rhythm of your mercy shapes all our music-making and we join with one another to give you thanks and praise. Amen. (Susan Briehl)*

The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Larry

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Spirit -Led Leadership - Hope-Filled Discipleship - Innovative Tradition - Collaborative Partnerships