

Sermon
Sunday, May 6, 2018
Psalm 98
John 15:9-17
Singing a New Song

Sing to the Lord a new song.

Shout with joy to the Lord.

Lift up your voice, rejoice, and sing.

Sing to the Lord a new song.

Today's appointed psalm – Psalm 98 – invites us to make some noise. Specifically we are invited – perhaps even directed – to “Sing to the Lord a NEW song.”

When was the last time you learned a new song? When was the last time you SANG a new song? Other than (maybe) singing along here on Sunday morning, when was the last time you sang any kind of song at all?

When was the last time you shouted with joy to the Lord?

When was the last time you lifted up your voice? Rejoiced?

When was the last time you sang a new song to the Lord?

You may reply – “I’m not sure. Besides, I’m not much of a singer. And what would I even sing about?”

We can look at the good news of today's Gospel for song inspiration. It gives us three amazing reasons to sing a new song.

The gospel today takes place the night of the Last Supper. Jesus is saying his goodbyes to his friends and giving them advice and assurance before he is killed. Jesus talks about the deep love between God and himself and his people. If his followers keep Jesus' commandments, they will abide in this love forever. His disciples will need these words to stay strong.....to not give up the faith....and to spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the world.

WE are Jesus' disciples now. And we must listen to these words so WE will stay strong.....not give up our faith....and spread the good news of Jesus Christ to the world. We must listen to these words so we are able to sing a new song to the Lord.

Here are three reasons Jesus gives us to sing a new song.

#1 - Joy! Jesus has shared God's love with his disciples in order that his joy may be in them – and therefore the disciples' joy may be complete. Because of the good news of the Gospel, we should always be joyful. Yes, we understand we are sinners. We will make mistakes. But we are redeemed sinners through the sacrifice of Jesus. Let us be joyful in letting everyone know this truth. Gospel commentator William Barclay states: "However hard the Christian way is, it is a way of joy. There is always joy in doing the right thing. A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms." Joy!

#2 – Love! Jesus states it clearly in today's gospel. He says "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." That's about as straightforward as you can get. "Love one another." There are no exceptions. Jesus didn't say "love one another unless that other person doesn't worship like you do.....or have the same color of skin as you do.....or comes from a different place in the world as you do.....or doesn't make as much money as you do....." You get the picture.

Jesus takes it a step further and says there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends. Jesus is speaking about the sacrifice he is about to make. So just to make this clear, Jesus told us to love one another as he has loved us....and he's going to show his love by dying for us. Whoa! OK, Jesus. Looking back and seeing the entire story, that is one hefty commandment. Today, I doubt we are often put in situations where we would actually have to give our life to prove our love. Of course, it could be possible. But what in our lives are we willing to sacrifice in the name of love? Our time? Our comfort? Our endless need for new and better stuff? Love!

#3 – Friendship! Jesus invites his disciples to be his friends. There is a long history of followers of God proudly being called servants of God. Joshua, David, and Paul all define themselves as servants of God. But Jesus now invites all of us to have a closer, more intimate relationship with him. Jesus has shared what needs to be done to spread the love of God to the world – not as servants who do not know what their master is doing, but as friends who work together. Friendship!

Joy. Love. Friendship.

Now we're ready to sing that new song to the Lord.

What's that you say? Oh right. You're not really much of a singer. Music really isn't your thing? Well I've got more good news for you. Singing a new song to the Lord isn't really about "singing." It's about a new attitude in your life. This "new song" we're invited to sing doesn't have notes or lyrics or a time signature. This "new song" is going to come from your heart and it's going to transform your soul.

If we are invited to sing a new song – to change our perspective, to adopt an new outlook on life - I suppose that means we've got an old song we need to stop singing. Or at least we've got a song that might need to be taken out of rotation for the time being.

Each and every morning we wake up and we make a decision about how we're going to approach life that day. Sometimes that decision seems extremely rote. We have a daily routine, and there is no need to change the way we approach it. But is that approach going to benefit the kingdom of God? Could we perhaps sing a new song that might help others as well as make our day even better for ourselves?

I have been recovering from a kidney transplant the past 8 weeks. Although things are going very well, it has been a difficult time in recovery. Mornings are often the hardest part of the day.

One morning this week, my husband commented I was in a good mood. He said "Your mood seems to be better today. Are you doing better? Or are you just faking it?"

It's a fair question. But I managed an incredibly truthful answer. "I'm not faking it. But I am working really hard at it." I wasn't pretending to be happier or in a better mood. I was actively trying to look past what I perceived to be problems and troubles in my life and concentrate on what was good. And believe me – there is a whole lotta good in my life.

So it is with all of us trying to sing a new song. We don't want to fake it. But we have to admit that learning a new song can be hard work.

We're not going to get it right on the first try. It's going to take some time and effort. It's going to take practice, determination, and patience.

So what am I really talking about? All this talk about a new song and a new attitude is wearing thin. How does this affect my life and what is Christ really asking of us?

St. Mark's community is facing some difficult times right now. We have had two funerals here since Easter. Two of our senior members have died. We miss them. Two of our youth – one them a newborn – are in the hospital facing very difficult crises. It is difficult to grasp. What can we do to make things better? What kind of new song is going to help us through these trying times?

Each of us has our own personal difficulties to deal with. It might be our health....or a relationship that isn't going the way we'd like it to. It might be a problem at work or school which is overwhelming us. These problems can take over our lives and leave us with little time or effort to consider learning a new song.

Many of us feel our society has gone off the rails. Our government seems to run on insults, lies, and hypocrisy. How are we expected to sing a new song – to build the kingdom of God – when our elected officials seem to be doing their best to tear it down?

It is difficult to wake up in the morning and do anything but sing the same song we usually sing. And often that is a sad song – a song of despair we've rehearsed and perfected until we are ready for Carnegie Hall. We know that old song so well. How can we possibly sing a new song?

Today's gospel tells us! Jesus has given us love – and joy – and friendship to sing about.

In his commentary on today's readings, theologian Daniel Clendenin has this to say about facing today's problems: "Choose the most radical of all political options today – the subversive act of genuine joy."

Let me repeat that. "Choose the most radical of all options today – the subversive act of genuine joy."

Instead of despair, sing about joy. Instead of gloom, sing about love. Instead of division, sing about friendship.

Concentrate on the healing that has taken place within our community of St. Mark's, and sing with joy in the belief that God will take care of each of us with love and compassion.

Make a decision to work towards change in your life – singing with love as you take steps to move beyond the problems you feel are holding you down and keeping you quiet.

Instead of wallowing in the mire of our government and our nation's racism and income inequality and threats of mass deportation and a collapsing education system – sing a song of friendship and do something to counteract all the negativity in the world.

Sing a song of joy as you visit someone in the hospital,

as you reach out and forgive someone you feel has done you wrong,

as you contact your congress person and make your opinion known.

Sing a song of love as you read the Bible and listen for the Holy Spirit speaking to you,

as you take a chance and tell someone who needs to hear it that you love them,

as you turn off the television news and learn the true facts about what's going on in our country and the world and what you can do about it.

Sing a song about friendship as you meet with a principal to discuss bullying at the school of a transgender youth.

as you take steps to stop an addiction or habit that is holding you back,

as you run for school board or an elected office.

Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing with all the heart and soul you've got. It will take time and patience and you'll hit a lot of sour notes along the way. But we are called to sing that song as loud as we can. And we can never stop singing until every voice is heard.

Sing out, my friends. Sing out! And keep on singing!