

THE SONG OF THE RIGHTEOUS IS A PRAYER UNTO ME

Originally delivered in Yale Ward sacrament meeting
October 9, 2016

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One of my favorite types of sacred music is the music of the Russian Orthodox church. It has its origins in Byzantine chant, but developed its own distinct style called Znamenny Chant. It is sung in Old Slavonic, so I cannot understand it with the exception of a word here or there that is similar in modern Russian, but I find it incredibly beautiful. Sung in resonant sacred spaces as part of worship services, you hear the devotion in the music. Not only are the sounds and attitudes of the singers imbued with beauty, the music is part of a rich symbolism, together with candles and incense, that help the worshipper to look upward to the divine. Other religious traditions have similarly beautiful elements involving music. For example, a *muezzin* calls out the *adhan*, or call to prayer, from the mosque five times during the day; a *hazzan*, or cantor, is a trained musician who sings prayers in the synagogue.

The primary focus of music in our own worship services, similar to much of the rest of Western Christianity, is less on the beauty that a single musician or specialized choir brings to the service, thereby deepening and enriching the worship experience for congregants, and more on the participatory nature of the music. While we have a strong tradition of and a key place for choral music in our worship, even more prominent and more fundamental is the role of congregational hymnody, or hymn singing. A hymn, by its very nature, is a song written for the purpose of adoration or prayer; the word “hymn” itself comes from the Greek

and means a song of praise. In 1830, the Lord asked Emma Smith to compile the first hymnbook for the newly established church, noting in the process: “For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of the righteous is a prayer unto me” (D&C 25:12).

If you’re like me, the words “adoration,” “prayer,” and “song of praise” usually do not cross your mind during the three and sometimes four points in a typical Sunday worship service when it is time for congregational singing. Rather, you realize it’s time to sing, you search in the back of the pew in front of you or on the floor or on the pew next to you for a hymn book, you look hurriedly up to the front of the chapel or shuffle through papers to find the printed program to see what the hymn number is, you race to find the right page and as soon as the piano or organ finishes the introduction, you start singing. You then sing all two or three or four verses of the hymn and sometimes you are caught off guard when you’ve sung all the verses on the musical staff and have put your hymnal away—only to realize the chorister has indicated that you should sing additional verses printed below the staff.

As I reflected on the role that congregational hymn singing plays in my own worship, I was struck by how very formulaic and mundane it typically is. And by how very far away it is from being a song from my heart, and a prayer to God. For the next few minutes I’d like to share some thoughts I’ve had as I’ve reflected on the notion that hymn singing is a mode of communication with God—and the notion that doing it all together is a fundamental element of our worship.

This idea of music being a vehicle to take our thoughts and prayers heavenward is not new. In several of the psalms, which are themselves prayers which were typically sung, we are admonished to “make a joyful noise unto God.” Psalm 98, for example, encourages us to “make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise,” while Psalm 100 speaks of “[serving] the Lord with gladness” and “[coming] before his presence with singing.” Alma speaks about “[singing] the song of redeeming love” and the Lord reveals to Brigham Young, as recorded in D&C 138, that we

should “praise the Lord with singing, with music, with dancing, and with a prayer of thanksgiving.”

The Old and New Testaments both provide rich examples of communal singing as a form of worship and prayer. In Exodus 15, we read of the Israelites singing praises to the Lord for delivering them from Egypt, including Miriam the prophetess leading the women in singing to the Lord, “for he . . . triumphed gloriously.” In Ezra 3, we read that the people “sang together . . . in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord” and “shouted with a great shout . . . because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid.” 2 Chronicles 5 tells us that the glory of the Lord was called down to the temple of Solomon through music. And in the Gospels we learn that Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn together at the conclusion of the Last Supper.

So what is it about singing hymns together, as a group of Saints, that is so foundational to our approach to worship that we spend roughly a quarter of the time that we’re together in sacrament meeting doing it? Congregational singing is at once wholeheartedly communal and thoroughly personal. In no other aspect of our worship are we so literally united as we are during the five or so minutes that we sing the same words to the same notes of the same hymn from the same page in the same book. We start together, we end together; we are, for those five minutes, one. And yet, those same five minutes are entirely individual. You and only you open your mouth to form the words and sing the notes with your entirely unique voice. You bring your individual set of experiences and circumstances and needs to hymn. Those same five minutes thus have the potential to be an intensely personal communion with the divine.

There is thus something very symbolic and beautiful about this practice of uniting around a single set of words set to a particular hymn tune. It strikes me that our hymn singing is emblematic of the notion that we are collectively the body of Christ—each of us individual and unique, all of us unified around a common purpose of loving and serving like Christ.

Let me mention a few other thoughts on congregational singing that we could explore more fully if we had the time. How does intoning someone else's words constitute prayer on my part? Many of the lyrics in our hymnal are poetry; many are thoughts expressed in ways we might not on our own consider or be capable of, but that can help us understand a truth or experience beauty or feel closer to God. And let's be honest, not all hymns are created equal. Some are likely more compelling to you musically or in terms of their lyrics than others; some may speak directly to you and others not at all. And lastly, in the Lord's statement to Emma, he notes that the "song of the righteous" is a prayer. Does that mean our hymn singing is prayer only if we are spotless? Of course not—we are all sinners; no one of us is thoroughly righteous. I therefore read the Lord's comment as, "the song of the person who is striving toward me, whatever that might look like, is a prayer unto me."

The final part of Emma's revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 25 is a promise that singing from the heart "shall be answered with a blessing on [our] heads." What sorts of blessings does congregational singing potentially bring us? I offer some thoughts based on my own experience. Singing hymns together can unify us. It can give us as individuals a sense of strength—have you ever sung a hymn like "The Spirit of God" in sacrament meeting or in a stake conference or even perhaps at a temple dedication and felt the strength and power of not only the music but of knowing that you are not alone in your strivings to be closer to God? Remember how the people singing together called down the Lord's glory to Solomon's temple? Our hymn singing can summon the spirit of God to our meetings and to our hearts. I believe singing with one another can strengthen our resolve and our commitment to lead a Christ-like life. It can bring peace and calm to our soul in troubled times. And the hymns we sing together can bring inspiration and answer to prayers, either in the moment or as we reflect on them later on.

An experience from many years ago reminds me of the power of congregational hymn singing. My friend Cathy was serving in the

Peace Corps in northwestern Kazakhstan while I was in Ufa, Russia, as a missionary. At the time, there was no church presence in Kazakhstan so Cathy took an overnight train to Ufa to spend a few days with me and my companions, with the primary intention of attending a church service, her first in almost a year. As we sang a hymn to open sacrament meeting in our little rented schoolroom, I turned to Cathy and saw her singing with tears streaming down her cheeks. We were just a couple of lines into the hymn, but already Cathy felt a unity, a strength, a peace, and the Spirit of God in a way she had not felt in a very long time. If only I could value the blessing of singing hymns together every time I open the hymnal the way Cathy did that Sunday.

In closing, in our religious tradition we do not have candles or incense to physically remind us to shift our gaze heavenward. Nor do we have professional singers leading the musical portions of our services, helping to deepen and enrich our worship experience. What we do have is the opportunity to join together and sing from the heart, to offer prayers and praises to God. We also each have the opportunity to decide how our approach to congregational hymnody will deepen and enrich our own worship. I hope that we can think about how to more fully sing from the heart, and that, like Paul, we can say that “I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Cor. 14:15). As we do so, I know that the Lord will answer with rich blessings.