

Raising Our Eyes and Our Voices
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 21, 2003
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Psalm 150 (NRSV)

¹Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

²Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

³Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

⁴Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

Philippians 4:8-9 (NRSV)

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

*Today, we continue the four-week series: Finding Joy.
Today is Music Appreciation Sunday. What a wonderful
occasion to contemplate Paul's teaching that we are to spend
our time on what is beautiful, pleasing, and excellent!*

Where do we head in our search for joy?

H. L. Mencken once wrote, "Nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public." Perhaps I'm just getting old or perhaps it is because I'm raising a teenager, but I'm reminded of Mencken's observation almost daily. Whether it is the latest installment of *Temptation Island* or the newest violent and sex-drenched music video from 50 Cent or another of Madonna's stunts, too often our popular culture wants to drag our eyes down to the worst in us rather than raise our eyes to the best in us. We are bombarded daily with images meant to convince us that the path to the life we seek is lined with stuff and with sex. But, in today's passage from Philippians, the apostle Paul points us in a very different direction – a direction embraced even by the pagans in Paul's day!

After urging the Philippians to find the peace of God and shed worry through prayer (v. 6-7 from last week), Paul goes on to point his readers toward a list of virtues. There is nothing particularly Christian about his list. The Greeks certainly advocated the virtuous life. The Greek philosophers urged people toward honor and truth and justice and purity and goodness. They understood that such virtues were essential to a truly fulfilling life. They would speak of the supreme Good and the importance of humans resembling the Good. We, of course, speak differently. We proclaim that

Why We Sing

Music has always been part of the fabric of Methodism. Our theology is expressed in the hymns of Charles Wesley. We sing that we may offer up joyful and bold praise to God. We are to worship God with our whole being and music engages our whole being like nothing else! (If you ever doubt that, just talk to a teenage about her music.)

John Wesley went so far as to give us directions for singing! Here are a few:

1. Learn the tunes.
2. Sing them as they are written. If you learned a hymn wrong, then unlearn it.
3. Sing everything. If you don't want to sing – sing anyway. John writes, "If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing."
4. Sing lustily and with courage.
5. Don't bawl out the hymn. Make one clear melodious sound.
6. Sing in time. Don't run ahead or stay behind. Avoid "drawling" . . . sing the tunes just as quick as we once did.
7. Above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature.

If you'd like to read all John Wesley had to say, turn to p. vii of your hymnal. I suspect that our congregation could do a much better job of singing hymns than we do!

God is not only the Good, but also personal and fully revealed in Jesus Christ. We don't talk about our resemblance to the Good, but we do talk about our own desire for Christlikeness. When we dwell upon the virtuous, we are dwelling upon God and the things of God. Tom (N.T.) Wright had this to say about raising our eyes, "How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly? How are you going to fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to be legitimately pleased with, and to enjoy and celebrate?"¹

Hearing the Voice of God

Not long ago, I heard a local musician talking about his devotion to God and to music. He commented that while he had once enjoyed playing the music of Mozart and Beethoven, he did no longer. He said that now he wanted to play only explicitly "Christian" music, such as contemporary praise songs and old hymns. While I appreciated his sentiments and devotion to God, he held a mistaken notion of what is God's and what is not. All excellent music points us toward God, whether it was written for that purpose or not – whether it was written by a Christian or not. In the movie, *Amadeus*, Salieri is driven to madness by his realization that God had chosen to be heard

Excellence

Have you ever wondered what God thinks of baseball? Personally, I think God enjoys a well-turned double-play! Here is what I mean.

In v. 8, when Paul urges the Philippians to dwell upon the things of "excellence," he uses a Greek noun that he never uses in the rest of his letters, *arete*. In the NT world, the meaning of *arete* was very broad, encompassing all virtues, all excellence, and all goodness. It was a word that certainly conveyed moral excellence, but also more and I think Paul uses it for that larger sense.

God is good – indeed, God defines it in his very being. All the goodness and all the excellence and all the virtues in God's creation point us toward God; it is all to God's glory. In the goodness of this world we can glimpse the kingdom of God. This is why Christians seek excellence in all we do – a well-done project at the office, a well-delivered lesson in the elementary classroom, a well-prepared meal – all this glorifies God. Will we actually *be* excellent in all we do? At least speaking for myself – of course not! But there is great joy in seeking after excellence and this is the path to which Paul points us. We are to raise our eyes toward God and all that is excellent in everything we do. This is part of how we go about finding joy.

through the music of the silly, far-from-devout Amadeus Mozart rather than himself. Salieri had prayed so hard that *he* might be God's vessel, but still, he knew that when he heard Mozart's music he was hearing the voice of God. All that is beautiful and true and excellent in this world bears God's imprint and glorifies his name.

Do as I say AND as I do!

Paul was certainly a bold and confident Christian. In v. 9 he commands the Philippians to keep on doing all that they had "learned and received and heard and seen" in Paul! How many of us could spend a few months somewhere and then in good conscience urge people to do as we had done? The verbs that Paul uses here speak to a body of practices and teachings that he has left with the Philippians. They are to be like Paul as they strive for Christlikeness.

On the passages that we've looked at this week and last, one commentator wrote, "Paul's wish is that the Philippians might enjoy productive, worry-free lives with their thoughts and feelings guarded by the peace of God. He told them that they might attain this goal with the aid of prayer and thanksgiving. But that is not all that is required. In v. 8 and 9 he adds still other important steps. He says that fear, worry, anxiety, depression—all the countless concerns that bombard the Philippian Christians' minds—can be kept at bay, if they will continuously reckon up, think over, estimate aright, fill their minds with all things good and true, and then rise up and put into practice the demands of the Christian gospel. "Then indeed," Paul says, "the God of peace will be with you."² Amen!

¹from Tom Wright's, *Paul for Everyone: The prison letters*, published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 2002. Dr. Wright is currently the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England.

²Hawthorne, G. F. (1998). *Vol. 43: Word Biblical Commentary : Philippians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 98 Sing to the Lord!</p>	<p>Day 2 Exodus 15:1-21 The Exodus song of Moses. God's people have always sung!</p>
<p>Day 3 Romans 12:14-21 Marks of the true Christian; notice Paul's command in v. 17.</p>	<p>Day 4 Philippians 1 & 2 You might use an easy-to-read rendering like the <i>Good News</i> or the <i>New Living Translation</i>.</p>
<p>Day 5 Philippians 3 & 4 Don't read too fast! Paul's letters repay a slow and prayerful reading.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's 9:30 class, Something More, now meeting in Wesley Hall (the "old sanctuary")!!

This new class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. It is a great chance to make new friends. More than 130 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today is Music Appreciation Sunday. It is a good time for us to reflect upon and discuss the place of music in our worship and our discipleship. Historically, the church was always a supporter and protector of the arts. Why would this be so? What role does music play here at St. Andrew? We have made a major commitment to the music program here. Why were we led in this direction? What part does our commitment play in our witness to the Plano community? How does music help us to be better disciples?
2. There is nothing distinctively Christian about Paul's list of virtues in verse 8. These are qualities that were honored throughout the pagan world. Greek philosophers had been pointing people in this direction for centuries. What does this have to say about the relationship between Christians and the "secular" world? Should we honor and admire these qualities regardless of where we find them? What can we learn from Plato or Buddha? What can't we learn?