

Sermon: What Faith Sounds Like  
Text: Ephesians 5:15-19  
Date: September 25, 2016  
Context: WWPC  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*. . . be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts . . .*

### Ephesians 5:19

For the last several days, I've been thinking a lot about my mother. More than I usually do, I should say. She passed away in 2012. Like those of you who have lost your moms, I think about her almost every day.

But her memory has been especially present to me during the latter part of this week. There's a simple reason for this. As I noted during the announcements, this past Friday we held a memorial service here in the sanctuary for Beth Meriwether's mother, Ellen Huggins

And as I said during that service, I've never met anyone who reminds me more of my mother than Ellen did, not even my mom's own sisters. They were both joyful women, these two, whose buoyant outlook on life was not just a function of their personality but a product of a deep, lifelong faith.

The one memory I have of my mom that sort of permeates all the rest is of her, singing.

Yes, she sang in the choir in church, but singing on Sunday morning was just the start of it. She sang while she folded laundry. She sang while pulling weeds in her flower garden. She sang while she put away the groceries.

Amazingly, it was not until just this week that I finally realized what I was hearing. Yes, my mom had a beautiful voice, and she loved to sing.

But what I was hearing was not just the voice of a woman who sang for the joy of it. What I was hearing all those years was the sound of faith itself.

For my mom sang unto the Lord, as Paul put it in the passage I read a moment ago. Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs comprised nearly her entire song book.

The same is true of us, here, on Sunday mornings. Whether we sing a beloved older hymn – one of those classics that is so familiar we don't even need to open the hymnal to sing all four verses –

or whether we sing a beautiful and inspiring newer hymn, like the one with which we opened our service with today, either way, when we sing these hymns, that is what faith sounds like.

Admittedly this is easy to do on Sunday morning, when we're all here together in this beautiful sanctuary, with the organ to anchor our singing.

For most of us, though, this is harder to do during the week. Singing unto the Lord while we are doing the dishes on a Thursday night does not necessarily come naturally to most of us.

And not just because we may be feeling a little weary from a long day of work, or because most of us know more songs by Frank Sinatra or the Beatles, or Springsteen or Adele, than by, say, Fanny Crosby or Charles Wesley.

All of that may be true. But sometimes, truth be told, the reason it's hard to sing these spiritual songs is because our faith may feel a little shaky, in light of what's happening in the world on any given day.

I don't know if this is any consolation but we're not the first people to feel this way.

In the opening sentence of the passage I just read, Paul writes: Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

We don't know exactly what Paul meant by that latter phrase, *because the days are evil*. In fact, we don't even know for sure that it was Paul who wrote these words. Scholars disagree on this point, as they do on most things.

But here's what we do know. Ephesus was a Greek city to the core. It was also a startlingly progressive one, too, especially for its time.

The Ephesians welcomed strangers to their city and allowed them to settle there, and to integrate.

They also valued education. And maybe most impressively of all, Ephesus was also known for valuing women's rights. To me all of this sounds like the dream many of us have for our country.

But then all of that changed. The Romans invaded and took over the city. They raised taxes to pay for their army. They mandated new religious and social practices.

Skirmishes and even wars broke out – not just in Ephesus but throughout Asia, as what was once predominately a Hellenistic culture – a Greek culture – gave way to the new, foreign social order imposed by Rome.

The new arrivals didn't speak the same language, worship the same gods, read the same books, believe the same things. And so there was tension between the longtime residents and the newcomers, and they fought about their differences.

Does any of this ring a bell? Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

It's been a long time in the life of this country since the days felt more evil, or at least more contentious than they do now.

The country most of us grew up in is changing. Old institutions and traditions and values are giving way to new ones, or at least it feels that way.

And so there is violence and protests in our streets. We fight about whether black lives matter, about whether undocumented workers should be deported, en mass. We fight about Muslim Americans and Syrian immigrants. We fight about guns.

Do I have a point of view on all these things? Do I believe that the church has a role to play in addressing violence and racism and immigration?

Well, really, have you met me? With the election now less than 50 days away, and in light of what's happening in Charlotte and elsewhere, it's sorely tempting to weigh in on these issues. But, honestly, today I would just rather sing.

Not because I'm reluctant to mix faith with politics, mind you.

From the Exodus to the Incarnation, from the first page of the prophets to the last page of the Gospels, the Bible tells a story about how God openly sides with the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, and it calls on the people who pledge allegiance to God's kingdom, to God's realm, to do the same.

So, yes, it's tempting to go down this road. But today I would just rather sing.

Not just because today is Vivian's first Sunday with us as our new Director of Music, though that is reason enough to want to do nothing but sing on this special day.

I want to sing today for a different reason. Because when the days are so obviously evil, as they are now, I believe we are called, as the church, and as individuals, to find ways to come together, despite our differences, and to make peace in the midst of strife.

And then I believe we're called to go beyond that and find ways to bridge those differences in the name of unity and, yes, harmony.

And nothing does this better than music. In her book, *The Power of Music*, the writer Elena Mannes explores why this is so.

It turns out that we're built, we're hard wired, to love music and be united by it.

Ms. Mannes found that infants prefer "consonant intervals, the smooth-sounding ones that sound nice to our Western ears in a chord, as opposed to a jarring combination of notes".<sup>1</sup>

She also observes that researchers have discovered that music stimulates more parts of the brain than any other human function. More than reading a book, more than eating a delicious meal, yes, more, even, than listening to a sermon, even one that's not mind-numbingly boring.

And music has this effect right to the very end of life.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from an NPR profile about Ms. Mannes' work, which can be found here: <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/01/136859090/the-power-of-music-to-affect-the-brain>

Naomi Feil is a 60 something year old Jewish American lady. She is also a therapist who specializes in working with geriatric patients.

Gladys Wilson is an 80 something year old African American lady. She is also a stroke victim. As if that weren't challenging enough, she also suffers from Alzheimer's disease.

Taken together, this means that Gladys spends her days locked up in a prison of silence brought on by the damage these two conditions have caused to her cerebral cortex.

Ordinarily, most people would not take the time to try to bridge the chasm that separates these two ladies --- different ages, different races, different religions, one of them white and in full control of her faculties, the other black with a mind damaged almost beyond repair.

They are as different, are these two, as the ancient Greeks were from the ancient Romans, perhaps as different as the Black Lives matter activists protesting on the streets of Charlotte are from the people watching the protests in dismay on their televisions.

So, no, ordinarily no one would make the effort to bridge this divide. Thankfully Naomi Feil is no ordinary person. When she sees Gladys she does not see a partially toothless old African American lady who is lost to the fog of Alzheimer's disease and with whom she has nothing in common.

No, instead, Naomi sees Gladys as a person, a beautiful older person, who is beloved by God and who has a heart and a history all her own.

And the one tool Naomi has at her disposal to bridge the gap that separates her from Gladys is music.

So first she leans down and begins to stroke Gladys's arm, and then she begins to sing. *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*

Naomi explains that she uses music to reach non-verbal patients because when speech is gone music can still touch us and reach us.

And she used religious music, the music of Gladys's faith, because there is emotion built into it and a sense of safety.<sup>2</sup>

While Naomi sings, Gladys first begins to tap her hand to the beat of the music, then she begins to tap faster. Naomi begins to sing faster.

Now it's hard to know who is leading whom. The only thing that is really clear is that these two ladies are joined by the music in a dance of love and tenderness, of joy and recognition.

And then the music slows. Naomi goes quiet, and Gladys stops tapping to the beat. She reaches out and takes hold of the sleeves on Naomi's blouse and pulls her close. Naomi leans in and the two women touch foreheads.

Now they are so close – this 60 something year old, white Jewish therapist lady and this 80 something year old, African American lady, ravaged by Alzheimer's – their faces are now so close that they could kiss.

Naomi takes Gladys's cheeks in her hands. "Can you open your eyes?" she whispers. Gladys does.

"Can you see me?" she asks. Gladys tugs on Naomi's sleeves. Her way of saying, *Yes, I can see you.*

And then Naomi begins to sing.

*He's got the whole world in his hands. He's got the whole world in his hands, he's got the whole world, in his hands, he's got the whole world in his hands.*

Gladys tugs again on Naomi's arms. *Don't stop.*

And so Naomi continues. And that's when the miracle happens, a miracle of connection made possible by music.

"He's got the mothers and the fathers . . ." Naomi sings, ". . . in his hands" Gladys whispers in reply.

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<sup>2</sup> A beautiful video of Naomi's interaction with Gladys can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrZXz10FcVM>

“He’s got the mothers and the fathers...”

“...in his hands”

“He’s got the mothers and the fathers...”

“...in his hands”

“He’s got the whole world in his hands.”

Sing it with me. We will do this call and response style. So just follow my lead...

He’s got the whole world ... *in his hands*

He’s got the mothers and the fathers.... *in his hands*

He’s got the sisters and the brothers.... *in his hands*

He’s got all God’s children ... *in his hands*

All together: *He’s got the whole world in his hands...*

And that my friends, is what faith sounds like.