

*A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 11, 2010, Easter 2, dedicated to Dominic Gabriel Bonito, Ava Lillian Straley, Adyson Mae Standard and Zuri Rose Standard on their baptismal day, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“A Symphony of Praise!”**

### **Psalm 150; John 20:19-31**

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

As a child, I loved going to hear the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra. With maestro Eugene Ormandy conducting, each concert was a feast of sound and praise.

One of the most surprising and unique symphonic pieces was *The Symphony of Psalms* by Igor Stravinsky, written in 1930. The first movement of this symphony opens with Psalm 39:14-15, a psalm of love. It moves into the second section based on Psalm 40:2-4, a psalm of hope and concludes with Psalm 150, a psalm of faith. Reversing the Apostle Paul’s lexicon of faith, hope and love, Stravinsky weaves his choral symphony into a continuous psalm of praise.

Drawing in oboe, piano, brass, strings and choir with a range of tempos and a mix of minor and major chords and themes, Stravinsky weaves together an unbelievable sound that echoes the depth and richness of his own Russian Orthodox choral tradition. As the piece enters the third movement, Psalm 150, the text of this movement is joyous, so the listener expects a fast, uplifting tempo, similar to the

sound we are presented by John Rutter in his composition on Psalm 150.

However, Stravinsky sets the text to a slow tempo interspersed with faster loud and forceful sections. Reflecting the struggle and tension that is present throughout most of the Hebrew scriptures, Stravinsky offers a different take on the psalm. At the close of writing this movement, his first of the three to be written on April 27, 1930, Stravinsky inscribed this movement "a week after Easter." Today, we arrive 80 years later in the week after Easter with this text calling us to our symphony of praise.

In the *Symphony of Palms* sung to us as the Psalms of David, the final movement is Psalm 150. The 150 psalms blend blessings and laments; cries for help and appeals for the poor, praise and triumph; sadness and joy. In Psalm 150, they end in this great "Hallelujah" chorus! The grand finale is a simple, straightforward doxological conclusion to God's psalter. In this psalm, we will see that worship is 1) a universal privilege; 2) always and only for our God 3); the result of who God is and what God has done; and 4) an exciting and soul-moving experience. The final notes proclaim: "Let Everything That Has Breath Praise The Lord! Alleluia!"

Psalm 150 tells us *WHERE* we should praise the Lord, *WHY* we should we praise the Lord, *HOW* we praise the Lord and *WHO* should praise the Lord.

**WHERE** should we praise God? (Psalm 150:1). We Praise God in "God's holy place." Whether the earthly tabernacle or temple in Jerusalem, whether First Church or under the blue skies of central Ohio, God's mighty firmament is the entire universe. In other words, our place of praise is anywhere, anyplace, anytime! There is no place where praise is unwelcomed and rightly voiced to God.

**WHY** should we praise the Lord? (Psalm 150:2) We praise God because of God's mighty acts (creation of the

universe), God's surpassing greatness (check out salvation and resurrection life!) and God's sovereignty and reign over all that has been created (day by day glory and light).

**HOW** should we praise the Lord? (Psalm 150:3-6). The simple answer is we should praise God with everything that we are and everything we have. The psalmist gives a list of praise instruments – trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, stringed instruments, flutes, finger cymbals, loud, crashing cymbals and dance. In other words, every nerve and fiber of our human bodies should be moving to the rhythm of life! In our time we could add piano, harpsichord, organ and the human voices we have been blessed to offer.

**WHO** should praise the Lord? I love the answer – EVERYTHING should praise God. Every creature great and small that has breath and life pulsing through their veins should praise God. That means from the smallest of our babies today to the oldest of our members and family, when we are laughing and singing, we praise God. When we are grieving, we praise God. In every season of life – including the sometimes long and extended seasons of sickness and death an endless praise should ever be in our hearts and on our lips. God's endless love should be acknowledged and celebrated in our symphony of life and praise!

Juxtaposed to this glorious symphony of praise, John's Gospel lesson opens with Thomas questioning the real presence of the risen Lord. Even though Thomas is viewed elsewhere as courageous, theologically alert and grounded disciple, even though the mission to India is associated with his name and a gospel is written in his name (the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas), here he is our "doubting Thomas." Once he sees and touches the healing holes in the body of the risen Christ, he believes. But it's the opening words and quandary for which we remember Thomas.

A symphony of praise and a head scratching encounter with the real presence of God have greeted us this first Sunday

after Easter. They seem at odds with one another, but are they really? In our lives, we often can't get to the full-throated song of praise without passing through the doubts of faith. It is in our doubts that the symphony of praise takes root. Consider Igor Stravinsky. His composition of the *Symphony of Psalms* was commissioned to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Leading up to this composition, Stravinsky had left the Russian Orthodox Church and only recently returned. When commissioned to write this piece, he saw it as an opportunity to proclaim the faith taking root in his spirit once again. He once wrote that the Holy Spirit moved him once again to declare his faith to all the listening world. And God provided the texts for the Spirit's voice.

We are stepping into the time of celebration and praise. It is our season of opportunity and challenge as we step up and step into the capital campaign at First Church. I heard an expression the other day. As the spring of 2010 comes upon us, people are finding their spirits affected by "frugality fatigue." In other words, people want to share and give and make a difference after almost two years of counting pennies and holding everything close to the chest. We have an opportunity to overcome our own experiences with frugality fatigue. I believe we are ready to feel the movement of the Holy Spirit and step into "the future's broadening way." To do this, we have to be touched by psalmist's heart of praise. We need to trust that God is calling us forward and open ourselves to giving for generations yet to come.

As I was baptizing Dominic, Ava, Adyson and Zuri this morning, I couldn't help but see your eyes of hope and delight. How will these four beloved ones benefit from our generosity? How will our symphony of praise overcome our fatigued frugality for these little ones and generations yet to come at First Church?

Remember, everything great that we undertake is done in faith. Everything great in our lives and in our life together as

a faith community is a movement is the symphony of praise for those yet to be. What we accomplish in our lifetime is ultimately a way of paying forward for the next lifetime of God's beloved ones. Eight generations of believers invested in First Church so that we might worship and serve today.

What the psalmist got right and Thomas got wrong was this: Praise of God gives us life, which is grounded in love, hope and faith. We need to trust in God to move us to new heights of giving and living. In other words, the psalmist demonstrates that believing is seeing.

So let us be believers! With eyes wide open and hearts of praise, let us sing with the psalmist: "Let Everything That Breathes Praise The Lord! Praise be to God! Alleluia!" Amen!

Copyright 2010, First Congregational Church, UCC