

Homily: *Then Sings My Soul*  
Text: Colossians 3:14-17  
Date: November 26, 2017  
Context: WWPC  
Sunday after Thanksgiving  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

*“ . . . with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns,  
and spiritual songs to God.”*

Col. 3:16b

About three weeks ago, Robyn and I went to see Garrison Keillor perform a one person show at Thomas Wolf Auditorium, right here in Asheville.

As it was just him on stage, we wondered what he was going to do to so as to fill enough time to make the cost of the tickets worthwhile.

As you would expect from American's master storyteller, he did what he is most famous for: he told stories.

Stories about what it feels like to grow older. About what it's like to have a daughter (I think it was his daughter, maybe his granddaughter) who sports so much metal in her face she looks like she fell into a tackle box.

Stories about Sparky the remarkable Labrador Retriever who likes to fish for walleye.

About how it came to be that twenty-four Lutheran pastors from Iowa were spotted on a pontoon boat, puttering around Lake Wobegon. (Apparently this was a form of punishment visited on them by their Bishop for not adequately naming the Father, Son and Holy Spirit on Trinity Sunday, as if Lutherans were becoming Unitarians!)

But in between those stories Mr. Keillor did something very special, something that is growing in popularity around the country, but that still happens most often in church.

He led us in several rounds of group singing. As he emerged from off-stage to start the show, even before we could see him, he began to sing, *O beautiful for spacious skies...*

And the crowd immediately joined in, which was his intention.

At intermission, which he requested so that other men of his age could take a bathroom break, he began to sing again:

*John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt, that's my name, too...*

And again the crowd immediately joined in.

Still later, as the show began to wind down, he first let us in a beautiful rendition of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*. (Admittedly, this time it was mostly him singing.)

And then he sang these words, so beloved by so many people of a certain age who grew up in church, myself included:

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder....*

And again, we all joined in.

On the drive home, Robyn and I both noted that we left the show feeling unusually buoyant, even edified. Why was this, we wondered.

We agreed that this was partly because Mr. Keillor did not utter even a single word about politics. (This was also quite surprising to both of us, as he regularly writes op-eds for major newspapers, commenting on the state of politics today.)

Of course our buoyant feeling was also partly inspired by his wonderful and hilarious stories.

But it was also partly, even largely, because of the singing.

And I can prove that.

The following is an extended quote I've taken from Time magazine about the benefits of singing in general, and group singing in particular:

*When you sing, musical vibrations move through you, altering your physical and emotional landscape. Group singing, for those who have done it, is the most exhilarating and transformative of all.*

*It takes something incredibly intimate, a sound that begins inside you, shares it with a roomful of people and it comes back as something even more thrilling: harmony.*

*As the popularity of group singing grows, science has been hard at work trying to explain why it has such a calming yet energizing effect on people.*

*What researchers are beginning to discover is that singing is like an infusion of the perfect tranquilizer, the kind that both soothes your nerves and elevates your spirits.*

(The full story can be found here: <http://ideas.time.com/2013/08/16/singing-changes-your-brain/>)

Then there is this, from a website called The Conversation:

*Listening to and participating in music has been shown to be effective in pain relief, too, probably due to the release of neurochemicals such as  $\beta$ -endorphin -- a natural painkiller responsible for the [euphoria] experienced after intense exercise.*

*There's also some evidence to suggest that music can play a role in sustaining a healthy immune system, by reducing the stress hormone cortisol and boosting the Immunoglobulin A antibody.*

(<https://theconversation.com/choir-singing-improves-health-happiness-and-is-the-perfect-icebreaker-47619>)

Back to the article from Time:

*The benefits of singing regularly seem to be cumulative. In one study, singers were found to have lower levels of cortisol, indicating lower stress.*

*A very preliminary investigation suggesting that our heart rates may sync up during group singing could also explain why singing together sometimes feels like a guided group meditation.*

*Study after study has found that singing relieves anxiety and contributes to quality of life. Dr. Julene K. Johnson, a researcher who has focused on older singers, recently began a five year study to examine group singing as an affordable method to improve the health and well-being of older adults.*

*It turns out you don't even have to be a good singer to reap the rewards*

*According to one 2005 study, group singing "can produce satisfying and therapeutic sensations even when the sound produced by the vocal instrument is of mediocre quality."*

And finally, from a website called More Singing Please, here is a list of the benefits of group singing, broken out into three different categories: physical, emotional, social:

**Physical:**

1. Singing exercises our lungs. It tones up our intercostal muscles and our diaphragm.
2. It can improve our sleep
3. We benefit our hearts and circulation by improving our aerobic capacity and we decrease muscle tension.
4. Our facial muscles get toned.
5. Our posture improves.
6. We can become more mentally alert.
7. Sinuses and respiratory tubes are opened up more
8. With careful training recent evidence suggests that it can help decrease the problem of snoring
9. There is a release of pain relieving endorphins.
10. Our immune system is given a boost enabling us to fight disease.
11. It can help reduce anger and depression and anxiety
12. Use of music can help people to regain balance if affected by illness such as Parkinson's disease.

**Emotional:**

1. [Singing can] increase in self-esteem and confidence
2. It increases feelings of wellbeing
3. It enhances mood
4. Useful as a stress reducer
5. It is uplifting spiritually
6. It can increase positive feelings
7. Encourages creativity
8. It can be energizing
9. It evokes emotions
10. Promotes bonding
11. Increases understanding and empathy between cultures.
12. It is healing

**Social:**

1. [Singing] enables you to meet more people
2. Is a forum for sharing
3. Brings people together and encourages a sense of community
4. Offers opportunity for giving and receiving positive feedback
5. A forum for fun & laughter
6. Support
7. Provides a safe environment to try new skills
8. Brings people together.

(<http://www.moresingingplease.com/benefits-of-singing>)

All of this is why, with gratitude in our hearts, we're now going to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God....