Westworth United Church Rev. J. Clark Saunders

2 Chronicles 5:11-14; Colossians 3:12-17 September 10, 2023.

Make Me An Instrument

Well, this is really … weird — weird and wonderful. When, after Mona and I both indicated that we would like to be here today, the Powers that Be decided they might as well put us to work. My first message to Mona was an email that began, “So, Mona. Are you feeling kinda time-warpy?”

It is both weird and wonderful after so many years to be sharing in the leadership of worship once again with Mona and Ruth and - especially today - with Dorcas. It is weird and wonderful to see so many familiar faces in the choir and in the congregation. In fact, a recurring nightmare of mine involves people coming toward me faster than I can come up with names. And if that nightmare is reflected in reality today I apologize in advance.

But I need to add, it is an indication of the health of the congregation that there are unfamiliar faces here today as well. I want to add my well wishes to all of you as Trish and Valdine and Megan begin a new chapter in their lives and work and lead this congregation into a new chapter in yours. It is good to sense that Westworth is in good hands.

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Grace be to you and peace from God and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Full marks if you noticed that I stole the title of this message from the title of one of the anthems this morning, a setting of the Prayer of St. Francis. “Lord, Make Me an Instrument”.

What exactly is an instrument? On a day like this we may naturally think of *musical*instruments - that’s the kind the reading we heard from 2 Chronicles was referring to; but there are other kinds - surgical instruments, for example, and legal instruments. It seems to me that an instrument is a means to a certain end. It is something that is “instrumental” in accomplishing something, in creating or producing something. In a sense it is a tool, an implement, something that becomes useful when it is placed in human hands. Even when we confine ourselves to the subject of musical instruments - and there are people here today who play a variety of musical instruments including the piano and the organ - what some have called the King of Instruments because it can produce so many different sounds - none of these instruments can do very much without the human element, without the musician. Even the human voice is an instrument, but it doesn’t make music until we engage breath and larynx and vocal chords and diaphragm and heart and mind to make sound.

Make me an instrument. It is a phrase that certainly applies to the ministry of music. It should be no wonder that music plays a part in the worship of most communities of faith - Christian and other. And that must surely be in part because music can communicate so much - adoration, comfort, contrition, reassurance, themes and thoughts and feelings that go beyond words. Music has been called the universal language, after all. There is something sacramental about it, I think. Sacraments are things that we do because words alone are not enough. Music is something we do because — even when the music includes words - the words alone are not enough.

I sometimes pause and wonder: what is it about a combination of notes - either a melodic phrase or a particular harmony or a surprising twist in where the music goes - that literally gives me goose bumps? What is it about sound that can do that? It’s a mystery. We might say, it’s a holy mystery. Like a sacrament.

When I was confirmed as a teenager I was asked a question that even then sounded rather quaint. I was asked, “Will you make diligent use of the means of grace?” Well, I said I would. But what are the means of grace? Well, anything, I suppose, that has the potential for bringing you closer to God - things like prayer, and worship, and taking Communion. And I think many of us would add, making or hearing music. For many of us, music in general and church music in particular is a means of grace. It can bring us closer to God.

But our title asks, “Make me an instrument.” Another translation of the Prayer of St. Francis - one that you will find in *Voices United*asks, “Make Me a Channel”. Maybe that’s the idea. Making music as an instrument of God is like being a channel for the things God wants to say to us and to the world. It’s not so much like being a painting that people look at as it is like being a stained glass window that people look through to the light beyond — or that the light beyond shines through to those on this side of it who see or hear.

And when we think of it that way - when we think of ourselves as instruments in God’s hands or as channels of God’s peace - there isn’t a lot of room for ego, is there. It isn’t all about us. As another hymn begins,

When in our music God is glorified

And adoration leaves no room for pride,

It is as though the whole creation cried

“Hallelujah!”

Yes. When you make music it’s nice to be appreciated; it’s nice to have some praise directed your way. But that’s not the main thing.

And, dare I say it, I don’t think it’s the main thing for Dorcas. Dorcas, as you must all know, does not use music for the greater glory of Dorcas Windsor. And she is no hireling who comes to church, does her thing and leaves. No, for her, all this has a larger context.

Dorcas, as many of you know - is a PK - a preacher’s kid. She was raised not only in the church but in the faith. And her commitment to the church and to the faith has been expressed through the years in so many ways: at the congregational level in book clubs and study groups, women’s groups, committees, and so on; and in the wider church and community through representing Westworth at presbytery and serving on its Hymn Worship Committee and delivering Meals on Wheels; and nationally and internationally through organizations like the Royal Canadian College of Organists and the Hymn Society of the United States and Canada. That list is only partial (and I haven’t mentioned her commitment to her family and friends) but it is enough to give you an idea of the larger context of her life. And it is enough for us to see that - while we might imagine that a person seated on an organ bench is working alone - so much of what Dorcas has done and is doing is collaborative. And I can tell you from having worked with her that she brings a collaborative spirit to the challenge of creating something together that is greater than the sum of its parts.

And it is enough to tell us that Dorcas is an instrument, not just when she is making music, but when she is living her life. And isn’t that really what St. Francis is praying for when he asks, “Make me an instrument”? May we all be instruments, channels of God’s peace and hope and love, not just in our music but in the very living of our lives. May that be our prayer for ourselves..

And for you, Dorcas, our prayer is that, as your life flows on in endless song, you will continue to be held fast by the love that will not let you go.

May it be so.