

Reflection 17 – The Power of Gathering and Communal Song

Some time ago I was corresponding with premier liturgical theologian Gordon W. Lathrop, asking for his help about something I had written. He told me about his new book, *The Assembly* (Fortress Press, 2022). I ordered it, began reading it, and found, as Professor Kevin Irwin says on the page facing the title page, a “gem that needs to be viewed . . . from many angles.” Here is one of those angles...

I have often realized for myself what Lathrop says for himself (p. 12, citing the 4th century martyr, Emeritus) about the importance of the weekly gathering of Christians around Word, Font, and Table—and for the same reasons: receiving the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God, and being sent into the world to share it. (Lathrop goes so far as to posit that the assembly is indeed the *primary* symbol of Christ’s presence among his followers.) Each time the realization comes from a slightly different angle in a particular context. In this instance it was as an American citizen, struggling in the midst of a cultural civil war and hearing the Minnesota Boychoir.

The Minnesota Boychoir, with our grandson Alden participating, presented one of its splendid concerts on June 4, 2022, at Bethel College in Arden Hills, Minnesota. The second piece they sang typified the whole concert and what the Boychoir and their director Mark Johnson regularly proclaim. The piece is “Do Not Leave Your Cares at the Door” by Elizabeth Alexander (b. 1962), with a text adapted from Norman V. Naylor (1925-1997).

Do not leave your cares at the door.
Do not leave them there when you come into this place.
Be open to forgiveness and transformation---
Come on in; you are welcome here;
And do not leave your cares at the door.

Bring your pain and sorrow and joy,
There’s a place for them upon the altar of life.
Be open to forgiveness and transformation---
Come on in; you are welcome here;
And do not leave your cares at the door.

This is a place of grace,
A place of losing and finding the way upon the winding road,
Meeting and parting,
Stumbling and starting over.
Every story is sacred here, even yours.

Do not leave your cares at the door.
Do not leave them when you come into this place.
Be open to forgiveness and transformation---
Come on in; you are welcome here;
And do not leave your cares at the door.

[Published by Seafarer Press in 2006. Order no. --- SFA-071-00. There are several fine performances available for viewing on YouTube.]

This text is clearly generated by the song of the Christian Church. Even the place of gathering sounds like the gathering place of the assembly at worship where we sing this very song in other words around Word, Font, and Table, and where forgiveness is proclaimed and received in the earthly elements of water, bread, and wine.

What the Boychoir sang is the counter-cultural song of the Church. This song is lived out at our communal gatherings in worship assemblies and then by each of us individually as we are sent from the assemblies into our world. Nobody is demonized. Everybody is welcome—to be forgiven and transformed in whatever state of pain, sorrow, and joy we may be in. Our cultural civil war has highlighted the counter-cultural aspects of this song.

What the Boychoir sang is the choral heritage of the Church taken into the concert hall. The concert hall is a fine place for it and where it has regularly been sung over and over because of the quality of the music and the importance of the message it sings. But the concert hall is a secondary place for church choirs, not the primary place. The primary place is the gathering, the assembly, where, as Lathrop says, it is “the rehearsed voices of the assembly, helping us all to sing” (p.9) and, I would add, singing what the rest of the assembly which includes people who are not musicians cannot sing. All people are invited to the song the whole gathering sings, in whatever state they find themselves, musically-trained or not, including those who are called “monotones” or “uncertain singers.” That means the Church’s song proceeds in two streams, one that is unrehearsed folk-song and one that is rehearsed art-song.

The unrehearsed stream is possible only in an assembly gathered physically together in one place. Our electronic wizardry and our cultural emphasis on individual soloists have tempted some people to say that we don’t have to gather together anymore, that we can do everything online. That is impossible. The best you can do online is “sing along” which is the misnomer our solo-singing stars and online singing have produced. Congregational singing is not “singing along.” It’s *engaged* singing. A leader (a singer or singers, organist, other instrumentalist or instrumentalists) leads and responds to the community, the community responds to the leader, the leader to the community, and back and forth it goes like all genuine ensemble singing.

This communal singing changes character with the day of the church year and its themes, a recent death or a wedding in the community, the physical season of the year, the time of day, the humidity, whether windows are open or closed, how much noise comes in from outside, how sick or healthy the people are, what their language is, and all manner of other subtle but important signals human beings who are together in one place give to one another. The rehearsed stream can be construed as possible online because you participate by listening to it. But even there this doesn’t work when the choir and congregation alternate in the same piece or even when the choir sings alone because the choral singing fits a physical and communal in-person flow that cannot be reproduced remotely.

Does this mean that communal song is required when we gather? That’s what my seminary Systematic Theology professor Gabriel Fackre (1926-2018) called a non-question. The communal song of the assembly is not a theory to be proven, a legalistic requirement to be followed or forced, or a commandment like love of God and neighbor though it expresses that love. It is what happens when people hear the mercy of God in readings and proclamation and receive it in sacraments. They sing. Those who have tried to stop the singing may be successful for a while, but not over the long haul. Even a powerful figure like Zwingli who stopped singing in

Zurich in 1524 was not successful. By the end of the sixteenth century the church in Zurich was singing again. Quakers have framed their silent meetings with singing. Administrators who follow the world's regard of the arts as un-needed trivia and say the Church does not need music or musicians cannot stop the singing either, even though they may momentarily be able to stop programs of musical study. The Church will always sing together because it must!

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