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Sermon for Evensong

10.11.26

Let the words of our mouth, and the meditation of our heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength, and our redeemer. Amen.

There is something rather wonderful about Evensong. We come into a church and for a little while, we stop doing. We stop explaining, organising, planning, solving, and trying to make things happen. We listen, we sing, we worship; together.

I spend a great deal of my life thinking about listening and singing: what and how we sing; breath and phrasing, balance and diction, the relationship between choir and organ, and what happens when the congregation sings together. I also spend a surprising amount of time wondering whether the organ will behave today, or how to persuade a roomful of people to come in on the same note at the same time!

But this evening's readings suggest that listening and singing are not simply things we do in church. They also teach us something about what it means to be the Church.

Psalm 111 begins with a particular understanding of praise. The psalmist's praise is not simply private. It is offered in the congregation. We lend our voices to one another, singing words that may be difficult to say alone and discovering that others can sometimes express the faith we cannot quite see in the moment; Their voices carrying us along.

That is the great gift of congregational singing. It is not in any way performance for which one person is responsible. The point is precisely that we do it together. And yet singing also asks something of us that is easy to miss: it asks us to listen.

We tend to think of singing as the active part of congregational music-making and listening as passive. The choir sings; the congregation listens. The organist plays; everyone else receives. But anyone who has made music knows that listening is an active discipline.

A choir cannot make beautiful music simply by having thirty people produce sound simultaneously. Singers must listen to one another. The soprano must hear the alto, the tenor the bass, and everyone must understand what the text asks of them. The organist listens to the choir, and the conductor listens to the whole room. Sometimes the most important musical decision is not to sing or play a note, but to leave space.

Silence is essential to music.

That is why, particularly in a service like Evensong, you do not have to sing every note to be a participant in sacred music. You do not have to be a musician, understand every harmonic progression, know the difference between a Phrygian cadence and a particularly unfortunate wrong note, or even sing at all.

Listening is active participation.

Our organ music before and after worship, for example, is more than a musical warm up to the “real” service or something pleasant to hear on the way out. A prelude helps us cross the threshold from the noise and demands of the day into a different kind of attention; a postlude gives us time to remain with what we have heard before returning to the world outside. Music helps us become attentive, and this attention makes us more available to encounter God.

When we listen attentively, we give something of ourselves to what we hear. We allow another person’s voice to occupy our attention. We make room for something beyond our own thoughts, experiences, and answers: something familiar, unfamiliar, or even unsettling. Listening can be a way of receiving, praying, and loving.

That seems particularly worth saying this evening, because today is National Coming Out Day.

Coming out is often described as “finding your voice,” and there is truth in that. For many people, it means moving from silence into speech, from secrecy toward truth, and from the fear of being known toward the possibility of being known and still loved.

But before someone can tell the truth about themselves, someone else must be willing to listen: with curiosity and love, without immediately trying to correct, explain, fix, debate, or reinterpret what has been shared. We are often much better at prematurely preparing our response than listening to the person in front of us.

Every one of us carries things we hope someone will hear correctly. We all have experiences that cannot be understood simply by looking at us, and parts of our lives we hope others will receive with tenderness rather than judgment.

National Coming Out Day celebrates those who have found the freedom to live openly, but it also asks what kind of community we are creating for those still finding their way.

Coming out is not a Christian obligation. Not everyone is safe to come out; not everyone is ready. Sometimes remaining silent is not cowardice but wisdom, or even survival. The Church must not pressure people into disclosure. It must become a place where, when someone is ready to speak, they can trust that they will be heard and seen.

This brings us directly to tonight's reading from Micah: "What does the LORD require of you?" To "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

We often hear these words as a list of things we should do. But humility and listening belong together. To be humble is to recognise that we are not the centre of every story, that our experience is not the measure of everyone else's, and that we do not always need the last word.

Humility enables us to listen to someone whose life differs from ours, whose experience challenges our assumptions, whose voice is quieter, or whose story makes us just plain uncomfortable.

This is part of doing justice, because justice is not simply about rules; it is also about ensuring that people are seen and heard. Kindness as an act is not merely being pleasant. It is treating another person's life as truly worthy of our attention and care.

Music offers us a useful example. A choir is not a community because everybody sounds the same. If everyone had the same voice, range, timbre, and musical instincts, we would lose something essential. Harmony depends upon difference and the attentive relationship between these differences. Each singer must know when to lead, support, wait, and make room.

Human beings are considerably more complicated than musical parts, of course, and identity or sexuality should never be reduced to simply another difference in the choir. But music reminds us that unity does not require sameness. A congregation need not share the same experiences, histories, or understanding of the world.

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians adds another dimension. Paul describes the Apostles as "a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals." We should not turn his experience into an easy analogy for coming out, but there is something here about what it means to be seen.

Being known can be liberating, but it can also be frightening. To be seen truthfully means surrendering some control over how others perceive us and allowing them to know something real. Anyone who has ever said, "There is something I need to tell you," knows that moment of uncertainty.

The question, then, is not simply whether people are allowed to be here—in our choir, at Food & Fellowship, or in the pews. It is whether people can be known here, and whether they can be known and still be loved. At St. Martin's, we strive for something beyond "All Are Welcome." We want people to know, "We are pleased you are here."

Psalms 113 gives us a vision of the scope of God's praise: "From the rising of the sun to its going down, let the Name of the Lord be praised." The psalm immediately connects that praise with the God who "raises the poor from the dust" and "lifts the needy from the ash heap."

Again and again, Scripture shows us a God who notices those others overlook, who hears voices others have been conditioned not to hear, and for whom we have not made space. Tonight, we bear witness and act in justice to God's love through service music written entirely by women composers.

And so we return to Evensong.

There is something wonderfully countercultural about sitting quietly while someone else sings. We do not have to produce anything, demonstrate our competence, or even have an opinion. We can simply receive. Perhaps a sung psalm speaks differently tonight; perhaps a chord catches us by surprise; perhaps a line of poetry speaks directly to something we are carrying; or perhaps we simply enjoy the sound of the organ.

All of that is active participation in worship.

Sacred music is not simply something the Church happens to do. It is one way the Church embodies and responds to God's love. Congregational singing teaches us that our voice belongs to something larger than ourselves; choral singing teaches us to attend to the voices around us; listening teaches us that receiving another person's voice can be just as important as adding our own.

The song of the Church is larger than any one choir, room, or tradition. It becomes stronger when people can bring their real lives into it, and when the rest of us are prepared to be part of those lives.

Perhaps one the holiest thing we can do with our voices is to make it possible for someone else to believe that they, too, have a place here. And perhaps the holiest thing we can do with our ears is to listen carefully enough that, when another person finally finds their voice, we are already prepared to hear them.

Everyone deserves to know that their whole heart has a place before God.

Amen.