



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

## *Praise*

**April 28, 2019**

### **Scripture: Psalm 150**

Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament!  
Praise God for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!  
Praise God with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise God with  
tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe! Praise God with clanging  
cymbals; with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!

### **Sermon:**

Praise. It is a word that strikes fear into most mainline Protestants. I will tell you this: we just spent 10 minutes talking about praise coming out of a source of joy. We talked about praise bubbling up in ways that our bodies couldn't even contain. And when we go to sing it, I'm not sure I saw any joy. I'm not sure I even saw a smile out there. I saw choir members even wondering Are we getting this right, are we doing this right? I saw the congregation saying Wait, this beat is syncopated, what am I doing?

Praise. It is something in our beautiful sanctuary like this that makes us a little bit nervous. But as mainline Protestants, we care deeply about the Bible. Sola scriptura, right, Luther wrote. Well, you should know this then: that praise appears in the Bible 437 times. It starts early in Genesis, and runs all the way through nearly the last chapters and verses of Revelation. To read this book is to read the word "praise". And it doesn't come as a description, it comes as a command. It is part and parcel of what it means to live as a person of faith.

And yet sometimes it is a word that makes us good New England Congregationalists nervous. Maybe it is because when we really give in to something like praise, it takes over our whole body and we might end up like Jon doing the happy dance in front of a whole church. But you remember what happened when Jon did that happy dance? What did you do? You smiled, you clapped, energy came right back. Maybe it's because it doesn't just cause people like Jon to dance and move, or Casey to dance and move. But maybe because it calls all of us to dance and move, and maybe each of us in the depths of our heart think that we dance more like Elaine on Seinfeld, if you know that reference.

I think that's too bad, because praise in the Bible isn't meant to be a command that elicits a dutiful response. It is instead a command which is a great gift offered to us. But before I try to convince you of just why I think it's such a great gift, and before I help you learn how it is for the remainder of our songs to fully engage in praise, I want to take a look at this thing called praise, what it is, maybe what it isn't, and especially why I think it matters. In our text for today, Psalm 150, the word "praise" appears 13 times in just 6 verses. Even Jakey could figure out the theme of that psalm.

And Psalm 150, remember, is the crescendo of what we call the Book of Psalms. It is the final one. It is the one that draws our attention to why it all matters. Does anybody know what the word "psalm" means? A song. In fact, a holy song, a sacred song, the kind of song that you sing here in a place like this, the holy temple, or as Psalm 150 says, out there by the stream. But if you read the Hebrew name for that book, It is not the book of song at all. Instead, in the Hebrew tradition, this collection is called the Book of Praises. And in that book, the command to praise is almost always in the second person plural. That's right, every time you read it in the psalms, it's really saying "all y'all." It means something to do together, not just to remember to whom each of us belongs, but rather the commonality of to whom we all belong.

To think of another hymn, The Tie that Binds. In one hymn of praise that I love, Jesus is called the barrier bestrider. That last word means two things, both of which I think are critical to our understanding of why praise is a gift. The first definition of the word "bestriider" is "to bridge or to stand over something." To connect two things together. The other actually means "to break down or to contest." Jesus is the one who bridges those barriers, Jesus is the one breaks down those barriers so they don't matter. When we together sing praises, scientists will tell you our body comes to life in ways almost unlike any other experience. Our minds are more open, our hearts are more alive. When we sing praises together, the air I breathe in you breathe out. We share the air, my sound waves echo off your eardrum, and vice versa. When we sing praises, we don't just sing them to God or Jesus through whom all barriers are broken down, but in the very act of singing we together join our breath and bodies to break down those barriers, that we might all become one.

In the Voice translation of the 150<sup>th</sup> Psalm, the 6<sup>th</sup> verse is translated this way: "No one should be left out of the praising. All of us need to be included. Praise brings us together." N.T. Wright looks at psalms of praise, and especially this one, the 150<sup>th</sup>, the one that calls us to pick up tambourines and dance, the one that calls us to dwell in a sanctuary like this one or go outside under the starry skies and breathe in the dewy air, the one that calls us to make noise. And N.T. Wright sees another barrier that must fall too, one that unfortunately we've all been taught over and over, and yet that barrier that exists between body and soul, between the fleshy part of living and the loving God in whose image we are all made. When we sing praises together the way the 150<sup>th</sup> Psalm calls us to do, we bring our bodies to bear, we enter into the singing, we recognize that our faith always has actually described and embodied faith, where our

faith and our flesh are not separate, but beautifully joined together. We break down those barriers that in any way tempt us to think of one part of our living as lesser than another, but instead brings the fullness of who we are into the act of praising God.

Two years ago, I went to an important conference at Yale that took a look at the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One night after all the sessions were over, we gathered in Marquon Chapel, and there we encountered three perspectives on how music fundamentally matters for the church of the future. The first person to step up was a very distinguished man who led a choir of 125 in Britain as part of a beautiful church service. He taught us how we can sing old things beautifully and fully. There arraigned behind that choir were French horns. We sang, for you music junkies, Thaxted, the Jupiter theme from Holst's The Planets. Our hearts swelled until we couldn't imagine how much higher and holier music could get. And then he sat down. Next up was Patrick Evans, a gift teacher of music, someone I want to bring here sometime to spend some time with you. He is enamored, affected, by world music. And so he brought all sorts of music from across the globe, international music reminding us of how we break down barriers not just between ourselves but the whole world too. And it was great.

But the last person, she stole the show. She was a classmate of mine at Yale Divinity School, her name is Charisse Baron. Charisse I don't think stands 5 feet tall, I think she's about 4'10". Her strength and her spirit is undeniable. And she got up and she said I'm going to do something that's going to make all of you nervous, I'm going to talk about praise music. And I'm going to do it right here in this chapel where every year that I was here at Yale I felt a little guilty about loving it so much. She said but if you're really going to understand this thing of praise music and what I'm talking about, you need to stand up. And so would you stand up for just a moment, as I try to convey half the passion that Charise has? She said praise music is about bringing your whole body, so make sure you've got enough room that you're not going to whack somebody on the side.

She said the first thing you need to know is you need to take those feet and plant them wide, giving you a solid base so you can go up and down. Why? Because when you start singing praise music, the Spirit's gonna come rushing at you. And if you don't have a young child anymore like I do, if you're not flexible and planted wide, when any force comes at you it's gonna bowl you right over. So make sure your knees are ready, make sure those feet are wide. Second, arms out. And why do we put our arms out? We do it to be welcoming. We do it to invite. But even more than that, she said, we do it to be vulnerable. When our arms are out, we cannot protect ourselves from that Spirit that is rushing headlong to meet us. That's all well and good, but then she brought up the last thing, the thing that we'd observed at Yale that I secretly envied every time someone did it. In praise music, you've seen it, someone raises their hand to testify, raises it up. And you know what she told me that's all about in her church?

When you sing this music, you are reaching up to heaven. But more than that, what you are trusting is that God is reaching down and God is gonna grab you by the arm and lift you right up. Praise music, she said, requires the fullness of who you are.

I'm going to ask you to keep standing for the rest of the sermon, it's not much longer. (Laughter) But it will encourage me to be brief. But one last thing about all this praise music. Just in case all I've described hasn't resonated, just in case those images feel a little distant for you, I think the most important part of the gift of praise and giving ourselves over to praise is what it does. So often in prayer we start prayer with an articulation of our need, we focus on our burdens, and our joys too. But we focus inwardly. Unlike prayer, praise begins simply by getting ready, opening and reaching up to God. And here's the gift: When we open ourselves to praise fully, it allows us to move beyond ourselves, beyond our needs, beyond our fears and hopes, and to return and to literally come face to face with our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Praise offers the gift to move beyond what the world tells us: that we are reliant on ourselves. To move past our limitations that we know can never be quite enough. And instead move into the limitless possibility of the God who is reaching down to grab your arm.

One of the most poignant stories that unfolded that night that Notre Dame burned, was a young woman who stood sobbing inconsolably. And when somebody asked her why she was so upset about this building burning, she said it was the one place on earth where its beauty, its scale, its majesty reminded her physically, not just of how small and limited she was, but the greatness of the God who inspired it all. To come into Notre Dame, she said, was to remember that life is not all about her, that it is not limited to her powers or the powers of any prince or principality. But rather life is about the life-giving power of God. Friends, that is exactly what singing praise is and does. And so if you can't resonate with anything else, when you sing praise music, imagine that you are building Notre Dame with your voices, that in your singing you might reach out beyond us all, and together to touch the source and the destiny of us all.

To sing praise is to open ourselves to the crazy mind-bending life-giving way of God, the one who despite all logic sent love wrapped in flesh lying in a manger to save the world. The one who shared our lot and offered us a way to live. The one who suffered and died at the hands of an earthly power. And then the one who showed us what true power is. And what the full potential of life might be.

We are about to sing a great Easter hymn, a great hymn of praise for the cross and the power of love that goes beyond it all (*Lift High the Cross*). May you truly in the singing of this hymn give it all up and let it go, and feel what a gift that can be. Friends, let us praise God!



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*