

Occasional Reflection 13:
For the Glory of God and the Good of the Neighbor

John Setterlund and I recently taught a course about J. S. Bach's *St. John Passion* on six consecutive Monday nights. In 2017-2018 we taught a similar course about Bach's cantatas. John has organized Bach's cantatas according to the three-year Common Lectionary.¹ During the 500th anniversary year of the Reformation the study of these wonders seemed like a good thing to do. This year, 2018-2019, the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Bach Society of Minnesota, and the Oratory Bach Ensemble & Minnesota Dance Theater are all performing Bach's *St. John Passion*. It seemed fitting to locate a course about this remarkable piece between those performances. We had no idea how many people would come and were surprised. We taught the course at The Lutheran Church of the Resurrection in Roseville, Minnesota, where, even on very cold and icy nights when schools were closed, about twenty people came. (Others told us they wanted to come but were out of town or had unavoidable conflicts.) Some knew a lot about the topic, some very little. They were all grateful and engaged participants.

On the last day of the course I thanked a number of people, including Timothy Bernard, the Pastor at Resurrection. I added that that not all pastors would welcome a musical topic like this. When I said that the class erupted into an explosion of thanks for Pastor Bernard, but also for voicing that addition—which leads me to reflect on some threads in these Reflections.

Themes in the church's experience have been noted in them: a pastor who would not let the congregation sing Psalms because he said they take too long; musicians who treat congregational singing with neglect or disdain; congregations who manage to sing even if their leaders provide no support; systemic abuse of church music and musicians; and the counter-cultural wonder, grace, and beauty of the church's music. In the midst of this confusing array it becomes clear that the church has sung and sings no matter what. The amount of music it has produced illustrates that. Joseph Swain says that the church has the greatest musical repertoire of any institution, nation, people, or religion in the world.² Bach summarizes its meaning: it is for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor.

¹ John Setterlund, *Bach Through the Year: The Church Music of Johann Sebastian Bach and the Revised Common Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2013).

² Joseph Swain, *Sacred Treasure: Understanding Catholic Liturgical Music* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012).

I received the Fall/Winter 2018 issue of *CrossAccent* during this course and noted that it mirrors some of these themes. The issue is called, “Singing the Psalms.” Chad Fothergill’s article,³ for example, begins with some things that are similar to what I said in the first of these Reflections about the Psalms as the womb of the church’s music. Then he gives a comprehensive summary of how the church has sung and can sing them. I would have noted this article in the Reflection on the Psalms had it been available then. It is indicative of why the church sings to the glory of God and for the good of the neighbor, no matter what. Paul Manz provides a similar indication.

On the very first day of this year, 2019—the 100th anniversary year of Paul Manz’s birth—Philip Brunelle sent me an unusual sermon he had found. It is unusual because Paul Manz preached it (at Wallace Memorial Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). Manz titled it, “Praising God in Words and Music.” Manz said he did not usually address a congregation from the pulpit, that he was a parish organist who preached from the other end of the nave, but that this was an occasion to explain his musical offering. He explained it by saying that the melody of the church’s music is the “great love of God” and “its harmony is about the first being last, the greatest being least, and the kingdom composed of children.” That is, it’s a counter-cultural song for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor.

Manz did not dream this up. Nor did Bach. They and many other church musicians have learned it in the community of the church’s song. Reaching back to the Psalms we discover what Chad says.

The psalms—as well as the hymns, anthems, and other texts that spring from them . . . strengthen and support us as we continue to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land that is numbed, paralyzed, and angry, divided by violence, racism, misogyny, xenophobia, and so many other forms of prejudice. [They] offer assurance and comfort to those afflicted by natural disasters, those who are exiled, and those who weep.⁴

That includes all of us sinners who sing and help others sing about God’s love and where it leads, often in spite of ourselves and our very own being in this “strange land.” We discover, like those we serve—gradually, suddenly, over long stretches of time, immediately, in little bits, in larger parts of the whole—what Manz says, that “making a new song to the Lord with our lives is an important way of understanding music in our church.”

³ Chad Fothergill, “A Psalmody Primer,” *CrossAccent* 26:3 (Fall/Winter 2018): pp. 11-34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

