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Music brings us together.

BY JORDAN MILLER-STUBBENDICK



Finding the
rhythm
of love



EACH WEEK I TAKE my 2-year-old son, Julian, to a music class for young children. In socks or bare feet, we gather in

a yoga studio in the basement of a Lutheran church, welcomed by the instructor, who is strumming a guitar. We sing songs that reflect a variety of musical styles, backgrounds and rhythm patterns. I am grateful for the care taken in these choices. I know my son benefits from this exposure to music, but my favorite part is watching how this diverse group of people comes together on a weekly basis around the sounds we sing and create together. To my knowledge, no one but the instructor has an official background in music, but there is most definitely space for each of us here.

As we tap and clap and play tambourines, sticks and drums, a baby who can't yet crawl rolls on her back, wriggling to the sounds. A 3-year-old races around the room making dinosaur noises. Moms and dads sing the melody, and grandparents sit on the floor or in folding chairs, keeping the beat with their hands. Our ages span the decades, and our life experiences are varied. Yet there is a place for each of us here as we learn, grow and enjoy the music together.

Music has a unique ability to transcend boundaries of age, gender and background. My son and I make music at home and sing in the car, but there is something special about participating in music together in a public space. This is an increasingly rare activity, and I am grateful for this chance to sing and enjoy music with others. The only other place in my life I do this is at worship.

As with music class for my son, at worship I gather with a diverse group of people to sing and make music. There is less running around in the sanctuary, and no one makes dinosaur noises, but there is greater depth and meaning behind the purpose for our gathering. Over weeks, months and decades, the music of the liturgy and the hymns soaks into our collective memory, shaping and forming us as God's beloved people. I often look out into the sanctuary to find people with their eyes closed, singing a portion of the liturgy or a beloved hymn from memory.

BROUGHT TOGETHER

Singing certain hymns in worship can bring me back to other times and places I have heard them. When I sing "How Great Thou Art," I am 10 years old in my grandparents' house in Edina, Minnesota, standing between my mother and uncle around the piano as my grandmother's practiced hands coax

the melody from the keys, and we all sing along. Upon hearing "Now Thank We All Our God," I am in my wedding dress, holding hands with my new husband as we walk down the aisle after our ceremony. And the first notes of "Silent Night" take me back to the days when I sang my newborn son, Julian, to sleep on dark winter nights.

Music transports us back in time, binding us together as few other things can. It holds power to bring us into community and create a place for all people. The congregation I serve is in the middle of the city. On a regular basis, we are joined in worship by neighbors who sometimes lack permanent housing and often deal with health challenges or other issues. Sometimes they are in need of food or other life essentials, but often they come to sing with other people in community. The music is a balm for their weary souls, giving them respite from the many cares weighing on their minds and in their hearts.

Singing together in worship is not about talent. It's not about perfect or even beautiful voices. It's about coming together to worship God, to be transformed by the music into a place with space for everyone, young and old, people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, political viewpoints and histories. Music, especially the music of beloved hymns and church music, is a

gift from God that gives us a rest from our daily troubles. It focuses us on God's love and grace in a way that helps when words alone falter. When set to music, the words of our prayers, dreams and fears are lifted up, making them easier to bear, making them more healing and hopeful than they could otherwise be. As Martin Luther is sometimes credited with saying, "When we sing, we pray twice."

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A PLACE OF WELCOME

Once in Chicago, I visited a congregation known for starting worship late and going long because their people loved to sing together. Their musical leaders had a way of knowing when the people needed an extra song or two to ease their minds, lift their spirits or express their delight. The people of that congregation radiated the kind of compassion, faith and grounding in God's love that is developed over time as trust, doubt and God's promises coexist in a body through

words and melody. Music lifts our hearts to God in a particular way. It sustains us in weary times and increases our joy during happy times. More than a program or a place, music is a strengthening, comforting, spiritual experience for people of all ages and backgrounds. Music creates a place of welcome for each of us. It is a form of hospitality, as all are invited into the space that is created to

enjoy and to take part. It is a natural intergenerational activity—a bridge between young and old and past, present and future. Raising our voices in song together goes beyond our individual efforts and experiences to become something collective, something that is more than the sum of its parts.

Music simultaneously locates us in time and takes us beyond time—binding us to all who ever sang these hymns and all who ever will—our grandparents,

neighbors, ancestors in faith and those who will come after us, many years from now. Singing beloved liturgies and hymns firmly situates us as God's beloved people of faith, now and always. With the psalmist, we sing out, "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations" (Psalm 90:1). Whether we take part in time-tested melodies or try out new music, we join with all of God's creation in singing and making music to the God who created and loves us all. We learn the breadth of God's story and our place in it, in a new way.

In liturgies and songs of faith old and new, there is space for each of us to belong. Like the other children, parents, grandparents and loved ones who join Julian and me for music class each week, we come from diverse backgrounds. We vary in age and life experience. We differ in many ways, but the music of our faith gives us a common language to voice our sorrows, joys and hopes—to God and to each other. Music gives us something solid to say when we lack the words. The church local and universal carries the melody when one voice falters. The music of the church—whatever instruments or voices are used, whatever words are shared or held in silence—creates a space and a place for all to belong, to grow and to be held in the melody of God's love. 🌸