

# “Loving God With All Our Hearts”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
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**Text: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!” (Psalm 150: 6).**

Several weeks ago I came across the review in the *New York Times Book Section* of Debby Applegate’s biography of Henry Ward Beecher, entitled *The Most Famous Man in America*.

I admit to a certain fascination with Beecher. He was from a very distinguished family. His father, Lyman Beecher, was a strict Calvinist minister and one of the most well-known ministers of his own time. Henry Ward Beecher’s sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was the author of the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a powerful portrayal and critique of the institution of slavery in this country and a work that many believe did more to bring about the end of slavery than any other single force in this country.

Henry Ward Beecher was the best-known preacher in America. Whereas his father had preached about the wrath and judgment of God, Beecher was the first minister in this country who spoke at length about the love of God. People flocked to his church in Brooklyn Heights, New York, to hear this dynamic preacher speak of God in ways that simply had not been previously explored. People came by streetcars, listening for the streetcar conductors to call out the stop “Beecher,” at which time the streetcars would empty out all of the passengers. Ferries also brought people to the church from all points of the New York harbor--“Beecher Boats” they were called.

Beecher’s influence was far and wide. People from all walks of life came to his church. Abraham Lincoln, who worshipped in his church, once observed that “no one in history had so productive a mind.” Mark Twain, a lifelong skeptic, admired the compelling way that Beecher

preached, entertained, and prodded his congregation at a level that few, if any, preachers had managed to do.

In his sermons Beecher not only emphasized the love of God, he was an abolitionist who worked tirelessly to denounce the institution of slavery. He was also an advocate of women's suffrage, which gave the right to vote to women. In addition, he helped to establish the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln to a place of prominence in this nation. He was, to use Applegate's expression, "the most famous man in America".

In the *New York Times* review, the reviewer made an observation that caught my eye, when she wrote that Beecher represented an age now well past, where worship and preaching were actually revered and where a powerful minister could actually command the attention of an entire nation.

## I.

There is nothing more central to the ministry of the church than the worship of God. When the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church identifies the "Great Ends of the Church" it states that the first great end of the church is "the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind." Worship is at the heart of everything that we do. The ministry of education, pastoral care, and outreach to our community begins with worship. It defines our identity and our mission.

That is why I want to focus your attention this morning on Psalm 150, the last Psalm in the Book of the Psalter. Dr. James L. Mays, in his commentary, *Psalms*, has observed that the book of Psalms begins with the call of Psalm 1 that calls us to "delight in the law of the Lord" (Psalm 1: 2); Psalm 150 is a call to praise God.

There is a certain simplicity and beauty to Psalm 150. It answers the most fundamental questions of worship: 1) Who is to be worshipped; 2) Why we are to worship; 3) How we are to worship; and finally 4) Who is called to worship. The one is to be praised is God, whose sanctuary is above the vault of the heavens. The reasons for our praise of God are for his mighty works of creation and salvation. The final verse of the Psalm calls upon everything that has breath to praise the Lord. In the Old Testament breath is what defines human life. Breath is the gift of God that makes life possible. In the Old Testament life begins with the "breath of God" and ends when God withdraws his breath from us. Thus the Psalm boldly states that we are to use the gift of life for the purpose of praising God.

And yet, the most remarkable aspect of this Psalm is found in verses 3-5, where the Psalmist deals with the question of "how" God is to be praised. The Psalmist insists that God is to be praised with music. He then expounds that theme by listing all of the instruments that were available for the practice of worship: trumpet, lute, harp, timbrel and dance, strings and pipe, sounding cymbals, and loud crashing cymbals.

The Psalmist is saying that in the worship and praise of God we are called to bring all our energy, all our emotions, and all our enthusiasm to the important act of praise.

## II.

Through the years music has played a critical part in the worship of the church. The New Testament follows the Old Testament in the insistence that music is central to the worship of God. The Gospel writers tell us that on the night Jesus celebrated the last supper with his disciples that after they had eaten together, “when they had sung a hymn they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Matthew 26:30). The Book of Acts relates that Paul and Silas, when they were imprisoned in the city of Philippi for preaching the gospel, were praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25). The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Colossae, admonishes the church in that city to “let the word of Christ rule in your hearts, and to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3: 12ff.).

Through the ages the Presbyterian Church has benefited from a wealth of Church music that has been bequeathed to us through the course of Western Civilization. From the establishment of the Christian faith as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century until the time of the Renaissance and Reformation, most of the music that was written and composed, along with a great deal of the art, was religious in nature. In the realm of music the contributions of composers such as Handel, Bach, and Mozart (just to name a few) have enriched life of the church in ways that are almost impossible to understand. In the same fashion artists such Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Rembrandt have brought a visual dimension to our faith.

In the realm of music certainly the figures of J.S. Bach and W.A. Mozart cast a shadow that few can match. As I have reminded Bob Ivey on a number of occasions, during the years that Bach served the church at Leipzig, each Sunday he composed the music that was played and sung. In a similar fashion Mozart’s music has had a remarkable impact on the church as well. Karl Barth, the great Swiss theologian, devoted an entire section of the *Church Dogmatics* to the influence of Mozart on his life. Barth began each day and ended each day by listening to the music of Mozart. Barth once observed that he believed that the angels in heaven sang the music of Bach, but when they went home at night, they listened to Mozart.

## III.

Now, one must be quick to say that the role of music in worship has always been a subject of great debate in the church. At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the Sixteenth Century the Reformers were very divided on this subject. For the most part, this had to do with the emphasis that the Reformers put on Scripture and the preaching of the word. Ulrich Zwingli, the great Reformer at Zurich, though he himself was a very accomplished musician, outlawed the use of music at the great church in Zurich. Martin Luther was criticized for introducing German “drinking songs” from the bars and taverns into the church. Luther replied with characteristic bluntness, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?” John Calvin insisted that music should be a part of worship, but that hymn singing should be limited to the singing of the Psalms.

Today there is an ongoing and intense debate about the use of contemporary music in the church. Recently, Pope Benedict XVI issued an encyclical calling the Roman Catholic Church back to the exclusive use of the “Gregorian Chants.”

There must, however, be no mistake about the importance of music to the life of the church. John Calvin understood that music has a certain power to move the human heart in a way that words cannot match. For that reason the Presbyterian Hymnal plays an enormous role in the life of the church. Harry Emerson Fosdick once noted that people would remember the hymn he had written, “God of Grace and God of Glory,” long after they had forgotten every word uttered from the pulpit of the Riverside Church of New York City. In the same fashion most people are more likely to understand Martin Luther’s “Away in a Manger” than they are the Ninety-Five theses he posted on the door of the church in Wittenberg.

#### IV.

In the final analysis, as Psalm 150 reminds us, worship is that activity that directs our attention to God. In worship we listen for God’s word in Jesus Christ. In worship we are reminded of the evil that is our lives and the promise of forgiveness that is offered to us in Jesus Christ.

Someone once observed that the boat of human life is rowed with two oars--work and worship. Work is what we do ourselves. Worship is what is done to us. Work has to do with activity. Worship has to do with receptivity. The trouble with many of us is that we are rowing with one oar and we are so focused on what we are doing, we are unable to open ourselves to those things that nurture and sustain us.

Let us not deceive ourselves. Worship is at the center of our lives. It has the power to encourage, to reprove, to challenge, and to comfort. Long ago the prophet Isaiah went into the Temple in Jerusalem where he heard a voice that said, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” To which the prophet responded, “Here am I; send me.” John Wesley worshiped one day in a little Moravian Church in old London, and went out on fire to change the whole world of English Christianity. Harriet Beecher Stowe sat in a little church in Brunswick, Maine, and was so deeply moved by a communion service that she was determined to write a book condemning slavery.

The biographer of Henry Ward Beecher tell us that on his travels Beecher often carried with him a small bag, which contained precious stones and that he took great delight in them: “diamonds, pearls, sapphires and emeralds” and that in moments of discouragement or despair he would get them out and find in them “rays of light flashing.”

In many ways the music of the church functions as did those precious gems. It comforts us in sorrow, encourages us in despair, energizes us when we are listless, but always points us to the one who shines “brighter, fairer, purer, than all the angels heaven can boast.”

Amen!