

S.D.G.

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian, New Canaan – Oct. 22, 2023 Cantata/Stewardship

Please Read:

2 Chronicles 5:13-14

Our church has a purpose that goes back thousands of years. Our reading from II Chronicles today is from the inauguration of Solomon's Temple. David wanted to build a place of worship where people could meet God, but it was his son Solomon who completed the task. And so it was that in 957 BC, almost three thousand years ago, the first Temple in Jerusalem was finished. And there was an orchestra and singers all joining together in praise and thanksgiving to God. Why? What was the theme of their worship and what is the good news we remember here today? "*For God is good, for God's steadfast love endures forever!*"

That fundamental truth, that God is good, that God's steadfast love endures forever, is the heart of worship and what we celebrate today. It's a truth that brings light in these dark times of hatred and violence, hope amidst discord and division.

When we remember God's goodness and love, that this is what is ultimate in the universe, the deeper magic of Narnia, the bass note of all reality, we can't help but make music. Immanuel Kant wrote, "Music allows the listener to 'experience a glimpse of the infinite and the divine through the structure and harmony, and this experience is essential for the cultivation of the human spirit.'"

Today we are blessed to enjoy a presentation of Bach's Cantata 29, *Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir*. "We thank you God, we thank you!" Some people would say that Johann Sabastian Bach is the greatest composer who ever lived. In Dylan Thomas's words, "Bach is best." We don't know that much about Bach the man, but we do know when he died he left a significant theological library. He was a Christian who cared deeply about God and spent time trying to understand God. Bach signed almost all of his compositions with the initials S.D.G. This monogram signifies the Latin phrase, *Soli Deo Gloria*, "To God alone be the Glory." That was the theme of Bach's life, and I think is a good motto for us all. "To God alone be the glory!" In the Westminster Catechism, the first question, "What is the chief end of man," is answered, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." To give God the glory is our *raison d'être*, our purpose and goal.

Bach used his music to give glory to God. The word glory in the Hebrew is כָּבוֹד ("kavod") and has its root in something that has weight. I was taught "kavod" comes

from the word for rock or something that is heavy, something you can hold onto, that will hold your weight.

The glory we read about in II Chronicles 5, that Bach dedicated his life to honoring, is the same glory revealed in Jesus Christ. The goodness of God. The steadfast love of God. The self-giving love of God. We desperately need to hear this Word today. In a world where violence is proliferating in Ukraine and in Israel and Gaza... in a world where violence and destruction, division and despair are rampant for too many people, we need to center again in our lives and life together the full weight of God's glory.

Terrorist and tyrants always want to silence song. They don't want creation's music heard – the voices of God's people to rise in hope and joy and praise. Terrorist and tyrants shoot concertgoers, ban lyrics, boycott singers and troubadours, all in a vain effort to turn song toward themselves and make themselves God.¹ But Bach knew different, and so do we: *To God alone be the glory*. That's what has the heaviness, the weight, the gravitas to give us any hope for forgiveness, for healing, for reconciliation, for justice, for peace.

You may wonder about this being Stewardship Sunday. I want you to remember that the invitation today is to glorify God by investing in the Beloved Community. It was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who shared the vision of the Beloved Community, a community where all God's people, whatever their race, religion, or nationality is honored as beloved of God. We need to remember that the glory of God is manifest whenever we show self-giving love to our neighbor, especially our enemies. When we choose not to dehumanize, but to see in them the *imago dei* and consider what is required to love them as we love ourselves?

An example in an investor of the Beloved Community was Charles Feeny. He died earlier this month, October 9th, at age 92, in San Francisco. He made his life's purpose to make as much money as he could and give it all away before he died. Bill Gates told Forbes Magazine back in 2012, "Chuck Feeney is a remarkable role model, and the ultimate example of giving while living." Warren Buffett presented a *Forbes 400 Lifetime Achievement Award* to Mr. Feeney in 2014, calling him "my hero and Bill Gates's hero — he should be everybody's hero."

In his last years, he did not own a car, a home, and preferred buses to taxis. He wore a \$10 wristwatch. Forbes said that no one of such riches had ever given away a fortune so completely while still alive. Mr. Feeney said: "I cannot think of a more

¹ Diana Butler Bass inspired this from her weekly blog.

personally rewarding and appropriate use of wealth than to give while one is living, to personally devote oneself to meaningful efforts to improve the human condition.”

Some of you may think life is about self-glorification. That’s what we’re taught to believe through the media and social pressures. Keeping up with the Joneses is a common sport here in New Canaan for too many. I invite you today to consider SDG. What if we dedicated our lives to the glory of God? What if like Bach and Charles Feeny, we did our best to use all that we are and all that we have to invest in the Beloved Community? Pledging our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor” to that vision of the Beloved Community for all?

One last thought. Have you ever wondered why we open the doors and listen to the bell toll at the end of our service each Sunday? At first I thought it was just a rather quirky ritual. But I’ve come to believe that it has profound meaning for us. The bell we hear stands above the memorial garden and columbarium, reminding us that the communion of saints surrounds us even in our worship. We must remember the beloved community members who have gone before us and who have given their lives, their tithes, offerings and gifts so that we could be here today. But the bell also calls us out into the world to be the church in the world. To give our lives to future generations of the Beloved Community.

So, friends, enjoy the music today. It is glorious, indeed. It reflects Bach’s deep belief that the Lord is good, that God’s steadfast love endures forever. That is what we’re called to be about as followers of Jesus. Following in the way of self-giving love glorifies God and helps us to enjoy God forever. May the tolling of the bell always remind us that we are called to glorify God by investing in the larger vision of the Beloved Community! *SDG Soli Deo Gloria!*

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.