

Organ Dedication Sermon by Nathan Alan Miller 9/11/11  
First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Greeley, CO

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9 Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

1 Samuel 16: 21-23 And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armour-bearer. Saul sent to Jesse, saying, 'Let David remain in my service, for he has found favour in my sight.' And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

---

Over the years I have learned that many people in worship like to count. They'll say things like, "Did you know there are exactly 38 lightbulbs in the chancel?" Not this chancel, that was another church -- so don't start counting. Someone told me the other day there are exactly 80 boards on each side of the ceiling in our sanctuary. They said they counted the boards during someone else's sermon a while back. This may be how people tell a preacher when a sermon is a bit boring. People are too nice to greet me at the door and say, "Well, pastor, that one put me to sleep in a hurry." So they'll tell me these things like: "Did you know there are exactly 25 shiny pipes above the chancel?" Yeah, I do know that. I helped carry some of those pipes into the sanctuary. I watched one of them get installed.

(to children): Let's make sure. How many shiny pipes? 25 (16' Principal pipes)

You're sure?

Kim, would you please play all those notes on the organ, just the shiny pipes we can see?

24 notes. But there are 25 pipes! Here's a secret. One of those pipes is silent. It has no voice. On purpose. You see, to get that pointy effect, you need an odd number of pipes. But there are only 24 notes. That's an even number. So the designer, he's sitting right there in the front row, Mr. Quimby, the designer of this organ put in that extra pipe to give it balance, so it won't only sound beautiful, it will look beautiful. And while we're looking up there, I want you to notice how those beautiful pipes outline the cross. They make a perfect place for the cross, don't they?

Some people might be upset, knowing that there's a pipe with no voice. Feel sorry for the pipe, or like it's a waste. But I kind of like it. Because it leaves room for each of us in this organ. We can be the ones that give it voice. When we sing our hymns with the organ, that's a perfect place for our voice. When worship helps us be kind to each other, especially if we're able to offer kindness to our neighbors and friends, even strangers, then we're giving our own voice to God's love. That pipe is our pipe; we give it voice.

And when you get to be old enough for Confirmation class, I might tell you which pipe is the one without voice. (children return to their seats)

As we prepare to dedicate our organ I'd like to bring you back to our second scripture this morning from 1 Samuel. It is an exorcism story of sorts. Never thought I'd help dedicate an organ with a story about exorcism. But did you hear what happened?

Young David, long before he was King David, was in the service of King Saul. His original job was that of armor bearer. But King Saul noticed there was more to David than meets the eye. David was also a fine musician. His music was soothing. And King Saul needed soothing.

You see, King Saul was a troubled man. The Bible says an evil spirit would come upon him. And when King Saul felt like he could not contain his torment, young David would play music, and Saul would find relief. The evil spirit would depart from him.

Today we might come up with a more modern diagnosis for King Saul. We don't deal much with possession by an evil spirit. Maybe the King was schizophrenic. Certainly he was paranoid. His mood swings were epic. Could be he was bipolar or manic-depressive. His relationship with David moved from moments of tenderness to violent contempt. So today we might label him with a more contemporary diagnosis. But back then his torment was simply understood as being visited by an evil spirit. David's music chases away the evil spirit.

Music may be that. Again, we could be more technical. Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging scans could tell us of subtle organic shifts in our brains as we listen to music. Our heart rates might change, our breathing deeper and more relaxed. All of that may be true but our experience of music, our experience is altogether spiritual. And that doesn't mean it is not also physical. In fact, just the opposite. All spiritual experience is embodied. Think about it. Think about an experience you would identify as "spiritual." The hair on your neck stands up, we shed tears, we laugh, we hold our breath, our hearts race or we find ourselves with this sublime sense of calm. With music we often tap our toes, bounce our heads, relax our shoulders, become weepy perhaps. In church we sometimes stand up and sing a hymn in a way that would be totally embarrassing in another context: Just imagine waiting in line at the Division of Motor vehicles and you just stand up and starting singing a hymn. ("Onward Christian Soldiers . . .") But here, with the encouragement of the organ, well, I like the image from this story of King Saul and young David. Evil spirits are cast out. A kind of exorcism takes place. And we are filled, we are filled with . . . what?

Those who grieve will find comfort. Those who celebrate will hear the joyful strains. That first Christmas carol introduction will announce the season with a fanfare of hope. On Maundy Thursday the darkness of Jesus'

passion will be echoed by our organ. And on Easter, there will be no doubt that the empty tomb is, indeed, good news for Jesus' followers. Our organ will not be the only voice in our sanctuary, but it will be a central voice.

It is well known that we hear music in a much different way than we do speech. As important as I may think preaching is, music can reach places in our hearts that are simply inaccessible by spoken words. So when I told the children about that one pipe without a voice, that one pipe to which we can give voice, I'm not talking just about speech. My hope, my prayer is that we give voice to that silent pipe with our hearts. In acts of compassion that transcend speech. In acts of courage, where evil is resisted and cast out. In acts of hospitality that go beyond statements of welcome. In acts of mercy that defy words.

All the craftsmanship, all the money, the years of effort and planning and organizing, it will all be worth it if this organ can encourage us to give our voices to an awareness, to an experience of God's Divine Presence.

We all have an image of that day exactly 10 years ago, September 11, 2001. I generally resist making a holiday out of events born of violence and hatred. Yet it is appropriate to honor the memory of those who died, and those whose lives were forever shaped by that day. The first responders, those who lost partners, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons and daughters, lovers and friends. As we remember images come to mind.

There is one image I'll not forget. The members of congress gathered on the steps of the Capitol that evening. The mood in Washington that season had been contentious. The big arguments were over the budget, taxes and social security! But that evening members of congress gathered on those steps. Speeches were made, a moment of silence observed. It was mostly scripted. But then they began to sing. It was not part of the script. Spontaneously they began to sing "God Bless America." The question was not "how can you sing at a time like this?" No. The question was "How can we not sing, at a time like this?" How can we not sing?

**Amen.**