

This afternoon at 3:00 will be the funeral for Gaither Bumgardner. As most of us know, Gaither has been our music director for the past several years. Last Sunday night Gaither had a stroke in the brain that progressed quickly. He never regained consciousness and his wife Lisa made the very difficult decision on Thursday to remove the life support that was keeping him alive. He died at about midnight on Thursday evening.

If you were here in worship last Sunday, you know that Gaither blessed us with his music. In fact, I made a comment about the special music that he played and how particularly energetic he seemed to be in playing it. I compared him to David Riddle which was a compliment.

It is hard to come to worship today and not see Gaither leading the music. One of you made the comment to me after hearing of his stroke that you were just in a very engaging conversation with him about his son's baseball career within the Mets organization. And as I looked at the sermon that I wrote on Thursday for today I just did not feel as though it fit. I did not feel it fit because I think that we need to have some time to mourn Gaither's death.

And as we mourn Gaither's death I think we also need to mourn some other relationships within the church that may be over or changed. I think we need to mourn that the church is not what it used to be. And by church I mean the institutional church, the Presbyterian Church, as well as Allison Creek Church. The church is not what it used to be. And for many of us, that makes us sad.

Today provides us an opportunity to reflect on the gifts that Gaither shared with us. Gaither was a gifted musician and a pleasant person to be around. Gaither was not perfect. Like all of us he made some good choices and some not so good choices. In the funeral today I am going to talk a little about how Gaither was a complicated person. He had tremendous gifts but he also dealt with some significant stress in his life.

Here at Allison Creek I think it is important that we take some time as part of worship today to mourn his passing. To recognize that he is no longer here and he will be missed. His gifts on the piano and organ will be missed. Due to the changes in terms of people learning how to play the organ we may not hear that instrument played very much within this sanctuary any time soon. That is the reality of our time. We need to mourn the passing of a great organist and we may need to mourn the passing of the playing of the organ.

But Gaither's death has also caused me to realize something and that is that this congregation has some tremendous musical talent within it. Within an hour of notifying people of his death I had three people contact me to offer their services to volunteer to lead music here. Proof to me that God is equipping this congregation with the right gifts as we move forward as a congregation.

God is placing the right people with the right skills in this congregation to create the type of worship that God is yearning for us to create. I don't know if any of us know what that is right now but it is clear to me that God is working to put pieces into place. God is laying a foundation here at Allison Creek to create something new and vital for this community.

I have heard from some of you who were in worship last Sunday that the piece of music that Gaither played for the special music has continued to stick with you. And it has with me as well. The piece of music he played is the music that CeCe played for the special music today. We are also going to be able to sing it in just a few minutes.

And so I find myself asking, why did Gaither feel led to play this particular song last Sunday and what could this song be teaching us today? Why did he play this particular song with such gusto? Why is this song sticking with those of us who were in worship last Sunday? I don't know the answers to these questions. But I find myself pondering these questions. Is God speaking to this congregation through this song? Is God trying to communicate something to us through this song? I don't know. But under the circumstances I think it's a question we should ask.

So what do we know about this particular song? First of all, the original tune is called "simple gifts." It comes from the Shakers. The Shakers were not a beach music group from Myrtle Beach. You don't shag to the Shakers. The Shakers originated in England as a splinter group from the Quakers. The split originated over the role of worship. The Shakers wanted a more lively worship which included dancing while the Quakers frowned upon the dancing.

A woman named Ann Lee joined the Shakers in 1758 and rose up to become the leader of the religious sect. One of the very unique traits of Shakers was that women and men were equal in leadership in the church. And this is the 1700s and early 1800s. In fact, the Shakers thought that Christ was coming soon and that Christ would return as a woman. Many thought that Ann Lee was this second coming.

Ann Lee and 8 of her followers came to the United States and settled in New York. They expanded in the 1800s and began several colonies. But they began to die out so that today there is only one Shaker colony remaining in the United States. And why did the Shakers die out?

The Shakers began to die out for a very simple reason. And this reason related to something they believed. The Shakers believed in celibacy. It's kind of hard to grow a religion when you don't believe in procreation. I'm thinking the celibacy is not what they have to teach us. At least I hope not.

Anyway, in 1848 one of the Shaker elders wrote the song which Gaither played in worship last Sunday and which we just heard played by CeCe. The lyrics we have in our hymnal are not the original lyrics to this song. The original song was called "Simple Gifts." The original lyrics were this.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained,
To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come 'round right.

Turning is another word for dancing. But the song begins with the words, "Tis the gift to be simple. Tis the gift to be free." In 1963, Sydney Carter used this tune and wrote the lyrics to the hymn "I Danced in the Morning." In just a little while, we will sing this version. So when we sing this song or hear this song played, we can celebrate the gifts that Gaither left to us.

During the prayers of the people this morning, you will be invited to lift any memories of Gaither that you would like to lift up. You are also invited to lift up anything else that you feel as though you need to mourn at this time. Maybe it is a relationship that is broken.

Maybe you want to lift up this church. Allison Creek has gone through some challenging times lately and we need to mourn the ending of some relationships. Maybe we need to mourn that the church as you have known it is changing.

The type of church where I grew up in and led me to profess my belief in Christ is a church that is about to die out. And that makes me sad. I mourn the passing of the church of my youth. The church of my youth is the type of church which makes sense to me. It is where I am comfortable. But I wonder if it is now a Polaroid camera in a smart phone age.

It's OK to mourn. It's important to mourn the passing of something that has been important to us. Mourning is the recognition that something has been lost.

Mourning is a part of healing. And we believe that Jesus is the great healer. We profess belief in God who raised Jesus from the dead which brought new life to the world and to us.

So today we recognize that Gaither is no longer with us. His gifts of music will no longer be shared with us. And his departure from this earth makes us sad. He will be missed. We celebrate that his pain is over and he is in God's loving arms. But he is missed on earth where we live. Today we also mourn the ending or changing of other relationships in our life. We mourn the changes and unsettledness we feel in the church as we have known it.

But mourning the ending of relationships and institutions is important. It is important because mourning is the beginning of healing. We mourn with the belief in the hope of the resurrection. And that hope keeps us looking toward the newness that God is creating all around us.

God through Christ does bring healing to any brokenness we may feel. We mourn but with hope in what God is creating. AMEN.

+++++

-Given: July 27, 2014 at Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Text: Matthew 5: 1-12