

## Preaching to the choir

*By Scott Tyra*

I sing in the choir. Jodi and I met in a church choir. I like choral music. I like the sound of it. And I like the idea of it. I think a choir is a good way of understanding the church and its ministry. A good choir has a lot of similarities with good church ministry.

There are traits that are common to good choirs. First, they are choirs. A good choir isn't just a group of people all singing the same song at the same time. It's a single thing, and everyone who's in a choir contributes. Every voice helps to make the sound that comes from a choir.

But being important isn't the same as being famous. Can anyone here name a member of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir? Or a member of the Vienna Boys Choir? Johann Sebastian Bach wrote hundreds of pieces of sacred choral music during his lifetime. His name spans centuries. But what of the choir members in Bach's Lutheran church in Leipzig, who performed new music by the great master every week? What did they get for their efforts, besides the glory of lifting their voices to the glory of God?

That's a lot, actually. And it points to the second trait of a good choir: Nobody in a choir is that important. As a choir member, it's not about you. It's about the choir. People aren't listening to you -- they're listening to the choir.

Years ago, I sang in a choral group that didn't understand this. We were a group of 48 -- literally. The director's notion of a great choir was a bunch of trained singers who tried to out-sing one another. We didn't listen to one another. We competed with one another. We weren't really a choir. We were 48 people singing the same song at the same time, and that's what we sounded like.

A third trait of good choirs is that they are greater than the sum of the individual voices in them. I don't happen to like the sound of my individual voice. But when I hear my voice in the choir, my voice sounds bigger and fuller. It's part of something that has resonance and depth. I'm helping the choir to produce a sound that my voice just can't produce on its own.

The Christian life is full of talents being used to the glory of God. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul describes a number of gifts of the Spirit: healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues, the ability to interpret tongues. Paul uses the analogy of a body to stress how connected all these gifts are, and how they work together to make something that works in ways that its parts couldn't individually. For Paul, all these gifts are important because the community of believers -- the body -- requires them all.

But then he says something further. For Paul, there is a most important gift, and it isn't one of these. Listen to the familiar beginning of Chapter 13, with just one word changed:

"If I sing with the tongues of angels, but have not love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal."

The most important gift is the one that everyone can offer. And it's the one that requires no fanfare, no attention. Actually, that's kind of the point. Like the voice of a choir member, without calling attention to itself, the gift of love makes everything around it fuller and better.

Why sing? Especially, why sing in church? It's a lot of work. It's especially demanding around Christmas and Easter. OK, we always have a guaranteed seat, even during the most crowded holiday service. But there's got to be more to it than that, right?

The movie "Chariots of Fire" recounts the story of Eric Liddell, the great Scottish sprinter and 1924 Olympic champion. He wasn't only a champion sprinter, however -- he was also an evangelist, and as he trained for the Olympics he and his sister Jennie were also preparing to be missionaries in China. In the movie, Eric's sister does not share his Olympic dream and accuses him of losing sight of his true purpose. But he doesn't agree, telling her: "Jennie, I believe that God made me. But He made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure."

There it is -- I believe that God made me. But God gave me a voice, and when I raise that voice with others together in worship, I feel God's pleasure.

Does that make singers special? No. But there's something about singing that gets to what I believe is fundamental about ministry. Singing is meant to be heard. It is a message that is meant to be delivered -- and also received. When the Epistle of James tells us to "be doers of the Word and not hearers only," note the language. We're told to be both. There is a time to give - - to sing -- and there is a time to receive -- to hear. Because you never know when those moments of God's pleasure will wash over you. Even in listening.

There can be moments of God's pleasure throughout our church lives. The Bible study that has a spiritual breakthrough. The mission trip that changes a life. Those are our moments of giving. But think of the moments of receiving, of listening. The sermon that seems as if it was written specifically for you. Or the moment when someone you've been sitting quietly with suddenly squeezes your hand and says, "You don't know how much just you being here means to me."

This is what I think makes the church work. We are all called to be doers of the Word. We are all called to be teachers, builders, greeters, singers -- all the things that make this a community of believers. And when we respond to our particular call, I believe that the Spirit -- God's pleasure -- can break in on our lives.

But there's the other side. We are to be hearers of the Word as well. We hear it in worship, in song, in the voices of children, in the silence of prayers. We hear it in each other, but only if we are listening. Listening to each other, and listening for God.

No, those moments don't last. They're not supposed to. Just like Jesus and the disciples, we're supposed to come down from the mountain. We have work to do -- classes to teach, meetings to attend, songs to sing. We need to be engaged in the work that opens God's presence for someone else.

Doers and hearers. Giving and receiving. Raising our voices. Listening. This is the church. This is the community of God.

A version of this column was originally delivered as a lay sermon by Scott Tyra, a resident of Las Vegas, where he is a member of the choir at Desert Springs United Methodist Church.