

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, March 11, 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. David Thompson**  
**“Don’t let anyone steal your song!”**

Mario, an outstanding tenor singer in the choir had reached the age of 105 with his voice still good! He was a real celebrity in the church because of his age and his remarkable voice. But one day he suddenly stopped going to the church. Worried by Mario’s absence after so many years of faithful service, the music Director went to see him. The director said to Mario “You have always been so faithful. What happened? Did you lose your voice and did not want to tell us? Or is it some psychological or spiritual problem?” Mario looked around and lowered his voice. “I’ll tell you,” he whispered. “When I got to be 90, I expected God to take me any day. But then I got to be 95, then 100, then 105. So, I figured God must be very busy and must have forgotten about me, and I don’t want to sing at the front anymore. It might remind Him.”

Paul and Silas were not in church when they were singing, but God noticed... exactly where they were: They were in Jail! I speak to you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Text: “Late that night Paul and Silas were praying and singing God’s praises, while the other prisoners listened... Acts 16: 25

One of the greatest violinists of all time was Paganini. One day as Paganini was about to perform before a packed opera house, he suddenly discovered that he had walked out on stage with the wrong violin. What he was holding was not his priceless instrument but an inferior one that belonged to someone else. Paganini was horrified and panic-stricken, but knowing that he had no other choice, he began to play with all of the skill that he possessed. Everyone agreed, after the performance, that he had given the performance of a lifetime. When he finished his concert, the audience gave him a standing ovation. After the concert, in his dressing room, he was praised and commended for his marvelous performance, Paganini replied, “Today, I learned the most important lesson in my entire career. Before today, I thought the music was in my violin but today **I learned that the music is in me.**”

Alan Cohen in his engaging little book Dare to be Yourself tells the story of a certain African tribe and the individual song that is created for each child. After an African woman from this tribe knows that she is pregnant, she and a few friends go out into the wilderness and pray and meditate until they hear the song of the new child. They recognize, in this way, the uniqueness of each child. When the women attune to the song they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else. When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child’s song to him or her. Later when the child goes to school, the village gathers and chants the child’s song. When the child passes through initiation to adulthood the people come together and sing. When the child marries, they hear their song. When the person is dying and about to pass from this world, the family and friends gather at the person’s bed, just as they did at their birth and sing the person to the next life. In this African tribe there is one other occasion upon which the villagers sing the child’s song. If at any time, during his or her life, the person commits a crime or an aberrant act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around them. Then they sing their song to them. The tribe recognizes that the correction for antisocial behavior is not punishment; **it is love and the remembrance of identity.**

In the Psalm reading this morning it picks up on the Babylonian Captivity. The Israelites are not only captive. They are too sad to sing. Now there were great reasons for that sadness as captives in a foreign land. But they were not only captives, they had let the oppressor steal their joy, so much so that they could not sing. But flash forward to the New Testament and we find that Paul and Silas sang when they were imprisoned. Strange behavior, don’t you think, after they had been publicly stripped and flogged with many lashes? They did not even have their wounds dressed- yet they sang. The earth quaked and their jailor, about to kill himself, was stopped from taking his own life after Paul reported that all the prisoners were still there. The jailor, totally impressed, has a life changing spiritual experience and asks how to become a

Christian. St Paul tells him. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be just fine!" Late as it was, the jailor washed their wounds and asked to be baptized. Then he took Paul and Silas home and gave them a meal and the whole family celebrated. Now what happens next is fascinating. The magistrates at daylight send an order to release Paul and Silas and the jailor relays the message to Paul: "The magistrates have sent an order for your release; you can go now and be on your way." "What?" Paul replies, "They flog Roman citizens in public and without trial and throw us into prison and then think they can push us out on the quiet! Oh no they must come and escort us out themselves." And Paul gets his way! **Why? Because he did not let them steal his song.** St Paul's song was *about love, self respect and identity.* He **Knew** who he was and *Who he belonged to!* The great Rollo May the psychiatrist has an amazing phrase that applies here. He says our goal to become fully human and mature is to **become a self-differentiated non-anxious presence.** That was what St Paul was; absolutely himself with his particular song to sing. That was why he was able to sing at midnight and give praise to God. **St Paul knew that his essence was not for sale.** He could not be bought. He was fearless for God and for goodness. Nobody could steal his essential song. That is why in actuality he was able to physically sing in jail. That is how he made his own great individual contribution to the world. **He knew who he was. Do you know who you are? Do you know your own unique song?**

I was reading an email from a friend who jets around the world on mission after mission. He finds himself enormously busy. He has only had one day off in a very long time and even on that day he has to stay in touch on his Blackberry and check his messages. We can get so busy that we can lose our song. So many of us today are too busy... Or we can get home after a hard day at work to discover that our child is sick and we have to deal with that and that depresses us. "Why me?" we say. A lot of us dwell on the negative issues in our life. We think about the people who have hurt us. We worry about all the work that we have to do. We worry about the economy, the war in Syria. We think about how unfair life is. We lose our song.

We remember that we used to be excited about life, that new relationship, that recent marriage so full of promise, but now we are dragging and have soured on life. We find ourselves depressed, angry, alienated, frustrated, betrayed, fed up. People who used to be our friends have walked out of our lives.

I remember a story about a man driving alone in the desert on a lonely road. His tire went flat while on a cliff section. He had a spare but no jack or wheel wrench. He moped around for a bit and then he prayed for help. There were no other cars on the road. He was stuck there, it looked like for the night. Strolling around on the top of the hill looking for some sign of civilization he suddenly noticed a car wrecked at the bottom of the gulch. It had been pretty well stripped but he noticed it was the same make and model as his own. He got down there to discover in the rusted trunk, the exact jack he needed wrapped up in an old tarp with a wheel wrench good as new! His spirits revived and he trekked up the hill. He instantly stopped dwelling on what was wrong in his life and started to be grateful for what was right. He started to whistle and soon was on his way.

### **What are we overlooking that will restore our song?**

Perhaps we have a problem that we don't trust ourselves. We have lost confidence. There was a business executive who was deep in debt and could see no way out. Creditors were closing in on him. Suppliers were demanding payment. He sat on the park bench, head in hands, wondering if anything could save his company from bankruptcy. Suddenly an old man appeared before him. "I can see that something is troubling you," he said. After listening to the executive's woes, the old man said, "I believe I can help you." He asked the man his name, wrote out a check, and pushed it into his hand saying, "Take this money. Meet me here, exactly one year from today, and you can pay me back at that time." Then he turned and disappeared as quickly as he had come. The business executive saw in his hand a check for \$500,000.00 signed by John D. Rockefeller, then one of the richest men in the world! "I can erase my money worries in an instant!" he realized. But instead, the

executive decided to put the uncashed check in his safe. Just knowing it was there might give him the strength to work out a way to save his business, he thought. With renewed optimism, he negotiated better deals and extended terms of payment. He closed several big sales. Within a few months, he was out of debt and making money once again. Exactly one year later, he returned to the park with the uncashed check. At the agreed-upon time, the old man appeared. But just as the executive was about to hand back the check and share his success story, a nurse came running up and grabbed the old man. "I'm so glad I caught him!" she cried. "I hope he hasn't been bothering you. He's always escaping from the rest home and telling people he's John D. Rockefeller." And she led the old man away by the arm. The astonished executive just stood there, stunned. All year long he'd been convinced he had half a million dollars behind him. Suddenly, he realized that it wasn't the money, real or imagined, that had turned his life around. **It was his newfound self-confidence that gave him the power to achieve anything he went after.**

### **Do you have self confidence?**

Too often we live to try to please other people. Don't do that. I love the book by Terrance Cole Whittaker particularly the title: What you think of me is none of my business.

You will get your song back only when you start to make positive changes to respect yourself. Love yourself and listen to your own song about love and identity.

When you start making changes, it isn't going to be easy. If you have been someone who has been controlled by another, they won't like it when you start to sing your song... unless they really love you. Then they will get excited, as you become all that you can be!

And if we are the controllers I have news for us as well. Controllers need to change. Let go of the guilt of others as the Lord's Prayer says: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." In other words, let go of the strands of other people's guilt that we are holding, and be free again. No anger, no resentments, no "you should've," no judgement of others!

The blessing of God can't come into our lives by us pressuring people in order to get our own way. It is time for us to take the high road, to walk in love and in our true identity as unique children of God. **Our song is not about control.** As a follower of Jesus Christ it's about extending love and receiving it at every stage of our life. Control for the Christian is surrendered to God.

So, control is not your friend! Instead 'Let go and let God'.

Joel Osteen says: "I recognize that our problems are real, and at times life is extremely difficult. But after you get through this problem, through this challenge, there will always be another challenge to overcome... If you are waiting for all your problems to go away, before you decide to get your song back, you will miss the joy of living. The Apostle Paul had all sorts of difficulties, all kinds of challenges. But he said: In all these things, we are more than conquerors. Notice he didn't say, "When these difficulties are done, I'm going to be happy." No, he said "In the middle of this adversity I am going to enjoy my life anyway."

Do you have a particular song that you own as yours?

My father's family song was *How good is the God we adore, our faithful unchangeable friend, Whose love is as great as his power and knows neither measure nor end.*

That was sung throughout his life at every transition point. They would gather round the piano and sing it. When my Dad got married and had a family we all continued the tradition. This song even showed up at his graveside, when we were about to put his casket into the earth. Suddenly out of the blue the pastor quoted it to the surprise of the family. When asked about it he said that he came across it 2 weeks before and thought it appropriate for a graveside ceremony.

The pastor didn't know what he was doing, but God did. That was my Father's song. The Africans would have understood perfectly...

Sometimes I meet couples who have their particular song. "That's our song" they say as they take the dance floor together. How lovely is that?

Do you let songs heal your spirit?

Once when I was beat up emotionally at a job I held, someone gave me a CD when I was in the pit of depression. There was a great song on it by James Cleveland:

*Nobody told me that the road would be easy, I don't believe he brought me this far to leave me. I feel no ways tired. I've, come too far from where I started from. Nobody told me, nobody promised me that the road would be easy... I been running for Jesus a long time..and for some reason I don't mind the pitfalls, [laugh] because every time I get to one He is right there. I don't feel no ways tired. Lord I've come too far from where I've started from...*

Nobody told St Paul that the road would be easy!

He didn't believe that God had brought him this far to leave him.

So... in Jail he starts to sing...

*I don't feel no ways tired. Nobody told me the way would be easy.*

Can you hear him?

Can you see the prisoners in the jail start to listen? Can you hear his voice getting stronger?

Can you feel the earth begin to quake? Can you feel the confidence coursing back in his veins?

Can you see his shining eyes? Can you see him getting escorted out by the magistrates who plead with him to leave town because they can't take it, when someone is 'no ways tired' and after flogging and they are still singing?

That can be you, that can be me.

Don't believe that God brought you this far just to kick you to the curb!

Don't let anyone.... steal *your* song!