

BLUE GRASS GOSPEL

Rev. Gary Magarrell

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This morning we are sharing the service with our own talented quartet The 4 Hymns. Their gift of music is a valuable part of our worship here at St. Matthew's one Sunday a month. However, today we focus on the gospel music tradition in North America. We have sung to the Blue Grass Gospel beat and heard again well known lyrics of faith.

Music has been an integral part of the Christian tradition since its inception. Organs were installed in the great cathedrals and music ranging from chants to hymns proliferated. With the Protestant Reformation, hymn writing abounded and church congregations and choirs sang out their faith vigorously, fervently and joyously.

North America's major gift to the hymnody of the church was the music and lyrics of Negro spirituals and gospel music. Today in our service we have focused on gospel music, its style, its message and its influence on the church.

At its most basic level, gospel music is sacred music. It is a unique phenomenon of Americana which has its earliest iterations toward the end of the 19th century. It is in the folk tradition which suggests that it was influenced by the contemporary music of its time especially the blues.

Gospel, which means "good news", derived its name from its close connection with the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the New Testament. The gospel themes of God's goodness and God's great mercy are central in gospel music.

There are no restrictions as to style of gospel music or audience appeal. Gospel comes out of the oral tradition of the poor, the downtrodden and the disenfranchised. To sing about a God who comes in the nick of time to deliver his people from uncomfortable circumstances is a consistent theme at the very heart of gospel music.

Enslaved blacks in America attended worship with their white masters. They became familiar with the old hymns and learned them by heart as most slaves could not read. The hymns of the white masters became the backdrop for the music the enslaved Africans would use at their worship meetings.

The unlawfulness of blacks congregating did not keep them from secretly holding "campground" meetings. These meetings were typically held at a distance from the main house to assure discretion and avoid possible punishment. It was during these meetings that newer renditions of traditional hymns were developed. It continues to be curious how such beauty and richness can and did emanate from such troubled times. Gospel music can stir so many emotions in us and wakes us up to the reality of God's abiding love and power.

Gospel music is music written to express either personal or communal belief regarding Christian life. Like other forms of Christian music the creation, performance,

significance, and even the definition of gospel music varies according to culture and social context. A common theme of most gospel hymns is praise, worship or thanks to God, Christ or the Holy Spirit.

Gospel music in the 19th century grew through two roots: the mass revivalist movement particularly of Moody and Sankey and the Holiness-Pentecostal movement. Prior to the tent meetings of Moody and Sankey in 1870, there was an American rural/frontier history of revival and camp meeting songs. However, gospel music outgrew its early form and worked well in the huge mass revivals occurring in the great American cities.

The popularity of revival singers and the openness of rural churches to this type of music led to the late 19th and early 20th century establishment of gospel music publishing houses some of which are in existence even today. Gospel hymn books entered the mass market and spread across North America.

The Holiness-Pentecostal movement appealed to people who were not attuned to sophisticated church music. Other instruments than the organ were introduced in worship and the instrumentation became as important as the words in the presentation. Late 20th century musicians such as Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis and Mahalia Jackson were raised in this tradition.

The advent of radio in the 1920's greatly increased the audience for gospel music. The 1920's also saw the marketing of gospel records by groups such as the Carter Family. In the 1930s in Chicago, Thomas A. Dorsey best known as author of the song "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" decided to give up writing secular songs and to turn full time to writing and publishing gospel music. He established a publishing house for music and is credited as the inventor of the black gospel style of piano music.

In the meantime, the radio continued to develop an audience for gospel music and gospel musicians. Following the Second World War, gospel music moved into the major auditoriums and gospel concerts became quite elaborate attended by huge crowds of believers.

Gospel music has divided into many subgenres. Let us look at the key ones briefly:

- Urban Contemporary Gospel – often called Black Gospel
- Christian Country Music – referred to as country gospel music which has country flair and is often called inspirational country. Christian country over the years has progressed into mainstream country sound with inspirational and positive country lyrics.
- Southern Gospel- sometimes this is referred to as "quartet music" due to the original all male tenor-lead-baritone-bass quartet makeup.
- Progressive Southern Gospel – developed in the last 20 years growing out of Southern gospel
- Celtic Gospel – this infuses music with a Celtic flair and is very popular in countries such as Ireland.

- Gospel Blues – a blues-based form of gospel music – a combination of blues guitar and evangelistic lyrics
- Bluegrass Gospel – rooted in American mountain music.

Today we are concentrating on Bluegrass music, a form of music with deep American roots. Its early roots came from Scottish, English, Welch and Irish traditional music. Bluegrass was inspired by music of immigrants from the United Kingdom and Ireland, particularly the Scottish-Irish immigrants to the Appalachia area of the USA. The evolving jazz and blues of African-Americans also influenced bluegrass. Traditionally bluegrass music is played on a small set of acoustic stringed instruments as we experience here today with the 4 Hymns.

Bluegrass music has attracted a diverse and extremely loyal following world-wide. Bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe gave his band's name to this form of music. His band was called the Blue Grass Boys.

Bluegrass as a style developed during the mid-1940s and came into its own after the war. Bluegrass is an amalgam of old-time music, country, ragtime and jazz. The Blue Grass Boys were formed in 1939 and in 1945 the band added the critical addition of a banjo player in the person of Earl Scruggs and singer-guitarist Lester Flatt. With the addition of the banjo, bluegrass had arrived.

Most of us who have been in the church for much of our life have been exposed to gospel hymns. These songs reinforce our belief in an active, caring God who walks beside us and never lets us go nor gives up on us. The songs often speak of great hardships, injustice, unfairness and pain of everyday life. The only hope of overcoming these realities and living a joyous life in spite of these issues is a faith in a God who sees and treats us very differently from the world and in time will “call us home.”

So today we celebrate the rich tapestry of faith music that is available to us for our worship life. We need to keep our minds open to the movement of the Holy Spirit through music past and present.

Since the beginning of time, people have tried in many ways to express their faith in lyrics and music. Nothing we do can fully contain the wonder of God nor can it ever explain all there is to our Creator God whose son was given for our redemption. For many of us, we feel closest to God in the hymns we sing.

And so we thank God for those faithful composers and lyricists for their faith which shines through their music whatever the style. And we thank God for musicians like our own 4 Hymns whose talent and faith help us experience in new ways the vibrancy of gospel music.