



In the midst of all the complications of the times caused by bombs falling from the sky, food shortages and particularly the Nazi Agenda "Action T-4," code name for the systematic murder of institutionalized peoples with disabilities, music that spoke of Christ kept Gunther going and kept the people of Bethel rejoicing in the Lord.

Gunther's story illustrates how Christ-centered music can be a powerful and significant part of the Christian's everyday life, just as Luther encouraged. In today's hyper-globalized society, where the God-given value of every human life is under attack around every corner, the Church's music ringing in our ears and hearts can constantly remind us of our worth and significance to Christ. The hymn writer states, "God's own child I gladly say it, I am baptized into Christ!" Indeed! When we recall our union with Christ by Baptism and faith, our lives can be lived, like Gunther's, as a joyous symphony unto the Lord no matter what our station.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. – Colossians 3:16*

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# MUSIC THAT SPEAKS OF CHRIST

**BY REV. NATHAN SHERRILL**

*Rev. Sherrill is pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Council Bluffs, IA, and executive director of David's Harp Center for Musical Development.*

**IN** a beautiful little book, *Bright Valley of Love*, Edna Hong tells of the many blessings that come through the music that speaks of Christ. A true story about a handicapped and neglected child born in Germany during World War I, *Bright Valley of Love* shows the difference that Christian hymns and fellowship make in our lives. Gunther, the main character, is placed in a community of 2,000 handicapped individuals at Bethel (a Christian home for the disabled) and is immediately lavished with love, respect, music, and Jesus.

Gunther arrived at Bethel unable to talk. He had previously been locked in a room in his grandmother's house because she considered him, "No good for anything." He was deformed from top to bottom, with hands and feet that were fused at angles clearly indicating abnormality. The inevitable day came when Grandmother lost her patience. She and her son took Gunther to Bethel and dropped him off, never to see him again.

Though Gunther's family felt guilty leaving him at Bethel, they were relieved to be rid of the "burden." The Bethel community, on the other hand, greeted him as though they were receiving a blessing straight from heaven. Pastor Kuhlo presented Gunther to a band of adoring new friends saying, "Monika, my little thrush! Gisela, my skylark! Heinz, my red-headed woodpecker! See, my little birds, I have brought you another

little warbler to sing praises with you." And praises Gunther would learn to sing.

After a thorough examination by Dr. Blumckes with a recommendation for a healthy dose of "sunshine and milk," Gunther was on the course to an unbelievable recovery, a recovery that was aided by Christian friendship, God's Word, and music.

Music at Bethel was part of the regular routine of life. The pastors and caregivers sang of Christ and His love and played instruments at all times of the day. The repertoire of musical lyrics that were on the tip of everyone's tongue would make you think that they were professional musicians or choristers. But this was likely far from the truth. Rather than professional musicians, they were professional caregivers. In other words, they were just Christians living out their vocations faithfully in that place.

Hymnody, part of Gunther's daily dose of enrichment, helped him quickly learn how to talk. Through the music of the Church he learned time. Before arriving at Bethel, he didn't know one day from the next. Now he not only learned the days of the week, but also the liturgical year, including important times and seasons like Advent and Christmas. Hymns helped Gunther understand and contemplate realities like death and dying as well as joy and rejoicing. They helped him articulate his thoughts and learn more about life. Most importantly, hymnody helped him know and love the Word of God. What wonderful things Gunther was learning at Bethel which he had formerly never known!

So many of the hymns that Gunther learned at Bethel were hymns of historic Lutheranism. They were hymns that Martin Luther or Paul Gerhardt wrote for a certain season of the Church Year or for a certain occasion in the midst of life. These hymns brought God's Word to bear on both the joyous and the difficult moments lived out at Bethel. And naturally so, for it was Luther himself who intentionally used music as a vehicle for the proclamation of the Word of God to the common man, woman, and child, not only within the walls of a church, but also within the walls of the school and the home.

Gunther's new home was much like what any Christian home should be. It included a place to live, a place to work, a place to learn, a place to eat, a place to enjoy the company of others and, in the center of it all, a place to worship Jesus. In all of these places, music helped him with the rhythm

of each day, from the morning until the children laid their heads down to sleep, and every moment in between.

Not long after Gunther was at Bethel he sang of Christ at the death of his friend Kurt on Christmas Eve. Later, he sang of Christ while watching cows during their daily milking. On another occasion he sang of Christ at his confirmation. One day, he sang of Christ due to a very special request.

The times were getting ugly throughout Germany in 1929 and the stresses of inflation and increased political tension were taking a toll on the pastoral administration at Bethel. Pastor Fritz's sister Frieda tasked Gunther with a new job. Beginning on Pastor's fifty-second birthday, Gunther was to stand in the garden right outside the pastor's study window and sing. Though Gunther was clearly apprehensive, Frieda replied, "No, you are not Enrico Caruso, Gunther, but there is more to singing than a wonderful voice."

Gunther, gaining courage, gradually broke into the singing of Pastor's favorite hymn by Paul Gerhardt:

*Evening and morning, sunset and dawning,  
Wealth, peace, and gladness,  
Comfort in sadness,  
These are thy works; all the glory be thine!  
Times without number, awake or in slumber,  
Thine eye observes us, from danger preserves us,  
Causing thy mercy upon us to shine.*



Image: Whitemay / Getty Images

The pastor, not only hearing Gunther sing, but singing such a fitting and wonderful hymn, cried out from his window, grasping Gunther's hand between his two hands: "Thank you Gunther! You have uncomplicated my day!"