



University Christian Church – Austin

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The Harmony that Heals

Pentecost 9, a, July 13, 2008

Jazz Sunday

I Samuel 16:14-23

Last week as we gathered in the Sanctuary, our own Rev. Kim Campbell preached the good news of God's grace, and our own call to live gracefully, graciously, grace-glowingly in the world. One of her prime examples of one who well apprehended that grace, was Martin Luther, prime mover of the 16<sup>th</sup> century's Protestant Reformation.

So I should like to lift up a quote of Martin Luther's this morning to begin to tie last Sunday's sermon by Kim to this Sunday's theme, and to lay the groundwork for next Sunday's sermon, as well. Hear Martin Luther in response to those who challenged him on his use – and they would say, misuse of a more common, less elevated and not-very-churchy style of music. The spirit of that dismissal would perhaps flow from the lips of Pope Pius the X..... nearly 400 years later in these words.

“Gregorian chant has always been looked upon as the supreme model of Church music... The more closely a Church composition approaches plain chant in movement, inspiration, and feeling, the more holy and liturgical it

becomes; and the more out of harmony it is with this supreme model, the less worth is it of the temple.” (*Pope Pius X, Motu Proprio (on Sacred Music), 1903.*

But Luther was far too enthralled with the wonder of God in this world to be so limited in his scope. His response was:

“When natural music is sharpened and polished by art, then one begins to see with amazement the great and perfect wisdom of God in His wonderful work of music....He who does not find this an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod, and is not worth to be considered a man.”<sup>i</sup>

His most famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” appears in our hymnal, along with 5 other hymns. He penned at least 37 musical pieces altogether, totally committed as he was to take the grace that God offers out of the stilted atmosphere of the cathedral, and into the street where FAITH meets the common person in their moment of deepest need.

And how would we name those most basic needs, the needs that a strong faith can answer?

First, one's faith provides a way of understanding the world. Here we are talking about providing a mental construct that makes sense. We come to understand the way that the world came into being involves God in some way. Some look to the book of Genesis and see there a literal blue print for the way in which God created. More moderate and progressive views understand that as a metaphorical way of saying that the creative Spirit of God was at work in the beginning in the development of the universe. In both cases there is a meaning imputed. Because God is at the root of creation and the sustaining of creation, it is

God's intention and will for this creation, which should be important in the way we understand HOW the world works

A second way that our faith can be of great value to us is in helping to determine ways in which to live. We are very practical here. We're talking about very basic order of life: what to eat and how to dress, how to work. We're talking about how to choose a mate and how to live in family together. We're talking about how to treat friends and strangers. Our faith provides this framework for us. Our faith teaches us how to live vis-à-vis others who are also children of God.

If we are very honest, a third function of faith has already come to our minds. For my family it is this role of faith that has been particularly powerful in dealing with the death of my father a week and half ago. I am speaking of those times of stress, times of challenge, in which our faith which comes to our aid in the form of a sense of the presence of God, or at least a sense of what it is that God wills for us, that enables us to move forward in a new confidence and a new strength.

This third function of faith is the one at work in a musical form in our passage from First Samuel. We find King Saul wrestling with inner demons that we would call today depression and paranoia. In days of the Hebrew Testament what we call mental illness was known as an evil spirit. And Saul and others of his day had learned that the evil spirit could be kept at bay when a proper, godly, spiritual music was brought to bear. "David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him."

You may be prone to chuckle at that notion. But I don't think it's so far from truth. Our son David has been living in New York city for the past year and he is several times a month a DJ at certain dance and music clubs that share his devotion

to a particular style of electronic music. Why do you suppose people pay good money-and in New York City I'm talking big money- in order to go to a club, and to pay a six times what a drink is worth in order to be in an atmosphere where a particular kind of music will incite the body and spirit in a particular way? These folks may not be what I'd call good stewards of their wealth, but they are doing a good job of banishing their paranoia, banishing their depression, infusing a new and different spirit- however transitory- that gets a person from day to day.

Music has always been known to be capable being a healing factor. In recent decades we have watched the burgeoning of the new field of music therapy popping up in university curricula all over our nation, with its practitioners serving in nursing homes & prisons, rehab units & hospices- basing their entire endeavor on the premise that music can be a powerful healing agent.

But this morning I ask you to consider with me not just the secular, therapeutic potentials of music therapy, but to look for a few moments at the spiritual trajectory of music -- what music at its highest spiritual function -- can become.

Our visiting quartet has led us in the musical celebration of a tradition many of us thoroughly enjoy and that is well-known to us. Their style and musical spirit are familiar to us, even if their leadership in worship is not. Jazz music is said by some to be the greatest, uniquely American mode of artistic expression. And we know what it sounds like, how it builds, how it grows, how it draws us in...

enveloping us in harmonies that can transport us from one spiritual state to another...

to some places, in fact, where we begin to loose that settled sense of self that anchors daily living...

to find a new level of inner freedom from that self....

Responsive to something bigger, something ineffable.

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The jazz musicians themselves at times are also moved into that larger space. One expression of being there is a characteristic that many of us associate closely with jazz, and here I am speaking of IMPROVISATION. Improvising! <sup>ii</sup>

Leaping from the score on the page,  
transcending the patterns of the music that have been long practiced,  
becoming suddenly and powerfully captured by the muse and

IN THAT VERY MOMENT becoming both composer of the emerging music and instantaneously performing it! No time to think, to adjust, to evaluate, no! As you improvise you go with what you are given. It is a breathtakingly daring act on the part of the musician!

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BUT, Let me suggest to you this morning, my friends, that THIS IMPROVISING IS AN PRECISE PARALLEL OF THE LIFE OF FAITH FOR THE CHRISTIAN.

Consider our musicians this morning, other jazz musicians, or for that matter, musicians in any number of musical genres that also have their improvisers: rock, bluegrass, even classical musicians Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, all given to improvising during performances. How does it happen?

First there are years of preparation: learning the instrument, studying the music, absorbing the good habits, the lifestyle, the sensibilities of one's forebearers in the art. And, yes, there is practice, practice, practice. Before you'll be ready to improvise, you have to have a strong sense of what has already been laid down, that great, solid foundation, and you must have a certain deep respect for what has come before you.

After untold commitments to the music in general, then there is this familiarity with the particular piece of music at hand. Often starting slowly, the connection to that particular piece grows and grows until it takes on a life of its own, and a honest to goodness relationship with it develops. The spirit of the musician becomes attuned to spirit of the music itself and, if the time is ripe, the spirit of the musician and of the music may leap together to make something new, some beautiful, innovative, unchoreographed dance that shines in freshness and at the very same time, remains utterly faithful to- rooted in- the original spirit that gave it birth. It is a kind of magic that is wondrous to behold.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, we can pray for those same moments of transcending grace in our lives faith.... And the process is surprisingly similar...

I hope that we have rooted ourselves in the Christian faith the same way the musician has rooted herself in a musical tradition.

I hope that we have read our Scriptures and so come to know them so deeply that the stories there, the moral precepts, the soaring poetic praise, the challenge to grow in love for others is not just familiar, but we have practiced, practiced, practiced them enough that we, too, are ready when called to dance.

I hope that we have developed our prayer lives deeply; have come to treasure those intentional moments of turning back to God; sitting in stillness before God; becoming familiar with the way the Spirit moves in us...

Because all of the years of preparation, as good as they've been in providing the foundation of faith,

As helpful as they've been in understanding HOW our world works,

As powerful as they've been in sustaining us in rough, stressful times.....

They are just preparation.... Just preparation for when that moment of opportunity comes. That time when we are challenged to make a decision on how to act, how to speak IN THE MOMENT, when there is no luxury of time to reflect....

when our upbringing in faith doesn't provide us a ready, easy answer to some new challenge;

when we have to step out.... Taking the big risk....

All those years of preparation in faith are like the jazz musician's years of preparation in music... preparation for when the moment of opportunity comes, to be ready to let go and trust the work of the Holy Spirit of the Living God, to be really living in us!

To say the word that is on our lips even before it is fully formed in mind,

To reach a hand to one in need even when you haven't yet analyzed all the possible ramifications;

To make that new, bold commitment that will change your life!

Oh to be ready for THAT MOMENT....A foretaste of glory divine, in A peace that endureth... that is our challenge today, yours and mine. May God grant us the grace of that dance!

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<sup>i</sup> M. Luther, 1538, quoted by R. Bainton in *Here I Stand*

<sup>ii</sup> There is only one verse in the entire Bible which uses the word improvise. We read that in Amos 6:5 where the prophet is castigating those who “lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music;”