

The St. John's Pulpit

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BEHOLDING ONE ANOTHER AS GIFTS

Gospel of John 19:14-27

Sermon 3 of 7 in Lenten Series

“Seven Words for Everyday: Jesus’ Words from the Cross Empower Us for Everyday Living”

Sunday, March 19, 2017 – Third Sunday during Lent; 95th Anniversary of St. John’s Celebrating Music

The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



Ah...music! If you ever meet a person who does not enjoy some genre of music, you will have met a person whose heart may be beating, but they are not alive.

Scientific research reveals how music enriches your living.

1. Music can help you concentrate and improve your memory.
2. Music can reduce your pain, stress, anxiety and depression.
3. Music can improve your energy and health.
4. Music can shape your ethics and morals.
5. Playing an instrument as a child or a teenager can increase your IQ and success.
6. Singing with a group can make you happier.

As we celebrate 95 years of music ministry in St. John’s, consider two other ways God’s gift of music enriches your living.

FIRST, GOD’S GIFT OF MUSIC BOTH EXPRESSES AND SHAPES YOUR FAITH.

Consider a world WITHOUT any music inspired by God. Consider living WITH NO songs about Jesus, faith, grace, the church or love. Imagine relating with God WITHOUT music and living your life without a song to sing. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “*It is not you that sings, it is the church that is singing, and you, as a member of the church, may share in its song.*”¹

Music expresses your faith.

Music also shapes your faith. When you are singing to The Living God, you must rest. In music, a rest allows you to breathe; pausing to reflect on the meaning of words or to feel the pulse of rhythm. Sound and silence are concomitant contributors to music. Your lungs and ears need moments of rest between breaths and vibrations of sound. And, as a living soul, created to bear the image of God, your spirit needs you to rest to be renewed and to be tuned TO – and to be tuned BY – the breath, rhythm and vibrations of the Holy Spirit of The Living God.

God's gift of music offers you a song articulating a conscious guiding theological vision and a commitment to the foundation of God's shalom; that peaceful serenity and calm in your core of your spirit empowering you to sing amidst a global cacophony of compulsive evil, horror, greed and destruction. So, listen ... listen for the one who inspires the music of this day. During these weeks leading up to Easter Sunday, as hours of daylight lengthen, sing the songs of the church allowing the light of God to point you toward visions of what the world is becoming in Christ.

We can join in singing the wonderful Quaker hymn,

*My life flows on in endless song above earth's lamentations;
I hear the sweet though far off hymn that hails a new creation.
Through all the tumult and the strife, I can hear the music ringing,
It finds an echo in my soul, how can I keep from singing?
What though my joys and comforts die? The Lord my savior liveth!
What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night God giveth!
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that refuge clinging,
Since Christ is Lord of heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing?*

Beloved, God's gift of music expresses your faith and shapes your faith.

SECOND, GOD'S GIFT OF MUSIC OFFERS YOU A METAPHOR FOR CHURCH.

When Mary received news that she would be the mother of Jesus, she broke forth in song. The shepherds heard the announcement of Jesus' birth from an angelic choir. As Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding, festive music filled the air. When Jesus finished the Passover meal with his disciples, they sang a hymn. But, while Jesus was hanging on the cross, no music played.

On that Friday afternoon, Jesus began writing a masterpiece called Church; new relationships between persons for all humanity. Jesus offered a new song to John and Mary that they could not yet sing. He looked at Mary and said, "*Behold your son.*" Then, he said to John, "*Behold your mother.*" He asked his mother and his best friend to behold one another. This word, 'behold,' is an imperative and suggests, 'understanding something new.' Soon the woman who had caressed the head of the laughing boy would tenderly disentangle a crown of thorns from matted his hair. Yet, in that moment, he asked them to truly 'behold' one another.

Consider what Jesus did on that day; he created a new meaning of Christian family. It was as if he placed his fragile mandate, “*Love one another,*” into the gentle hands of Mary and John.

Some of you understand very well what Jesus was doing in those words. A few of you experience more love in St. John’s than anywhere else in your life. Some of you have been beaten up by fundamentalist churches or discompassionate groups and a few of you experience love and acceptance here more than in your own family. In St. John’s, we seek to offer a community where the relationships we share as sisters and brothers in Christ reflect the song, “*They will know we are Christians by our love.*” To be honest, some days we are better at this pursuit than others.

I offer to you that each person in this church is like a note. I would never seek to propose who is a quarter note or a half-note or a whole note; merely that each one of you is a note – a sound. But, together, we become a song.

When Kevin rehearses with the Chancel Choir or when Noel practices on the Letourneau Pipe Organ, they sometimes stop to pay attention to only one note. Each note is equally important. In like manner, we are always improving upon how we give attention to each note as having value in the life of the church.

In our St. John’s Covenant, we recite, “*We will love and encourage each other in the family of the church and admonish each other as occasion may require.*” Notice that it may be necessary to ‘*admonish*,’ however, it is always essential to ‘*love and encourage each other.*’ And those charter members of 1922 had the spiritual insight to add these words: “*Our differences will not separate us but rather increase our understanding and strengthen the bonds of Christian love.*” For the most part, members of St. John’s have been guided by these covenant commitments. We realize that we need one another like notes need one another. So, we follow the teachings of scripture and the conductor of our faith: *we bear one another’s burdens, pray for one another, forgive one another, honor one another, accept one another, submit to one another and serve one another.* Above all, as Jesus taught, we *love one another.* Beloved, by loving one another, we sing the masterpiece Jesus wrote upon the cross.

There are many stories of ‘Beholding One Another as Gifts’ in our St. John’s heritage. One of my favorites is a story told by Dr. Claude Broach in his book, ‘*Before It Slips My Mind.*’

Dr. Broach served St. John's as Senior Minister from 1944 to 1974. He followed Dr. Chauncey Durden who served St. John's as Senior Minister from 1929 to 1944. Here is how they met.

“Every profession has, or should have, its code of ethics, a standard by which a man's conduct toward others in the same profession may be directed or measured. There is, therefore, something called “ministerial ethics,” although it has a rather shadowy, unformalized existence. Some attention is given to the matter of ethics in most seminaries, and one of the accepted principles taught to the young minister is that when a pastor leaves a church he should thereafter leave it alone and not keep coming back to participate in the life of the congregation or otherwise try to perpetuate his influence while the church moves on under a new pastor.

Unfortunately, this is not always done. Since most of us look better from a distance, pastors sometimes get promoted to sainthood after they leave – especially if the new minister wants to change some traditional procedures or challenge some sacred cows, “Dear old Dr. Dingaling would never have done it this way! He was such a fine and gentle man.”

When I came to Charlotte to talk with the Pulpit Committee of St. John's, I was disturbed to learn that Dr. Chauncey W. Durden, for fifteen years my predecessor at St. John's, was to live in the old parsonage, just a block away from the church. Perhaps he sensed my concern over this information and perhaps not, but M.A. Hogewood, chairman of the Committee, arranged to take me to Dr. Durden's home for a visit. We spent a delightful hour in conversation about many things without ever mentioning St. John's. We talked about the professors we had known at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, about people and places in our home state of Georgia, about Charlotte, but not about St. John's.

The hour passed quickly and pleasantly, and we rose to take our leave. The old preacher, then 76 years of age, walked slowly with me to the door. Suddenly, he stopped and faced me. Gently he put a hand on my shoulder and looked me squarely in the eye as he spoke:

“Young man, before you go I have something I want to say to you. From what I hear, the people on the Pulpit Committee want to recommend you as pastor of St. John's. But I know what must be going through your mind. You're wondering about coming to a church with the old pastor living just around the corner. So I want to put your mind at ease.

“For over fifty years I have been a pastor. But I have never had a pastor. Now, in my old age, I would like just to be a member of St. John's, and I would like for you to be my pastor.

And you will always have my love, my support, and my prayers. I believe you are God's man for St. John's. Now, before you go, I want to give you my blessing."

So I knelt and he put his hands on my head and offered his prayer. Like Elijah for the young Elisha, or Paul for the young Timothy, he prayed for me. If you should ask when I became pastor of St. John's, the official records say July 23, 1944, but in reality it was on that day in April in Dr. Durden's living room.

And the old gentleman kept his word. My soul! How he kept it! He declined to perform weddings or conduct funerals. He would be asked, and would always reply, "No. Thank you for asking me, but you must ask the pastor." And he would not budge from that position.

Consequence? He helped me to become pastor of St. John's and he became all the more beloved as the former pastor. He lived eight years after I came, and his mind was undiminished; he still wrote sermons and read avidly in fields of learning which the pressures of work had denied him. We spent many a pleasant hour together, talking about theology and history.

The last time I saw him alive he was in a hospital room, and very weak. I stood by his bed for a long time and talked in whispers with one of his daughters. Though his eyes were closed, I think he knew I was there.

After awhile, I said to the daughter, "I must go now." I bent over the bed and kissed his brow. The eyelids fluttered, and he weakly raised a hand, and spoke his benediction. "*Pax vobiscum*," (peace with you) he whispered, and went back to sleep."

Beloved, let us mature in beholding one another as gifts of God by singing the masterpiece of Christ's Church! *Pax vobiscum*; 'peace with you.' And, 'shalom!' Amen and AMEN!

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: A Discussion of Christian Fellowship*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1954, p 61.

² Claude Broach, *Before It Slips My Mind*, Delmar Printing Company, Charlotte, NC, p 21.