

“From Melancholy to Music: From Despair to Dancing”
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I don't know all that much about music, so every year right after Easter, I am reading books to be able to give you this sermon today. The book that I read this year – if you ever get it – might look like a nice, old, table-top book that you set out right there in your living room. But, while it's beautiful and has a lot of nice pictures, glossy pages; it is really a wonderful book on jazz. It is entitled “Jazz: A History of America's Music.” I try not to read to you, but I really like what this little section says; and, I would like to share it with you, because it exemplifies what Jazz is.

Jazz is the story of two World Wars and a devastating Depression. Jazz is the soundtrack that helped Americans get through the worst of times. Jazz is about sexuality, the way two people talk to each other and conduct the complicated rituals of courtship; a sophisticated and elegant mating call that all but disappeared from popular music in recent times. All of this bouncing around by yourself; our generation doesn't realize what real dancing is: You put your arm around her – that is your one chance. Good gravy we blew it. But Jazz is also about drugs and the terrible cost of addiction, and the high price of creativity. It is about the growth and explosion of the radio and the soul of great American cities: New Orleans, where the music began and was born; and, Chicago; Kansas City; and New York City, where it grew up. It is about immigration and assimilation, and feeling disposed and finding the way home, and the music that came to rescue everyone who felt lost and disenfranchised. It is about sacred communion between the performer and the audience. It is about suffering and celebration. It is about tapping your feet – tapping your feet if you are male or female, if you are an addict or an orphan, if you are from a rural background or an urban background, if you're sons or daughters of privilege or despair, who took enormous risks to make sure that the beauty, the wisdom and the experience of Jazz continued; and, for those unimaginable people who had the rare but powerful gift to be able to do what the rest of us can only dream of: to create art on the spot. That is Jazz.

True music isn't just something that was created in New Orleans in the 1800's. The 19th century music goes all the way back to the very foundation of the human history; its early ability that humans had to take sticks and beat them together to make a rhythm, then to find logs they could beat on to make sounds. People were instinctually driven to create music, somehow, someway.

You go back to the very origins of the Bible. you find in Genesis 4:20-22 there is a description of the origins of skills – and the origins of skills described three skills necessary for the survival of human life. If you go back and read those two verses, they talk about blacksmiths, cattle herders and musicians. [Laughter] I got the first two, but the third one is a little iffy. All the way back to Genesis 4:20-22 – for survival – you had to have blacksmiths, for obvious reasons; you had to have cattle herders because it was an agrarian society – understandable so that they could, or the blacksmiths had the tools to carve the ground, to provide for the seed so that life could grow – cattle herders so that they would have meat.

Here is God, or God's offer in Genesis – the very first book – talking about the very creation of the world, saying that without music life does not exist. Survival as a species needs food and music – and that is biblical, my friends, biblical. The Bible affirms music as food for the soul and the soul is as [important], or more important than the body.

The earliest Christians, as I said, loved their music. Think about after they got drumming on the logs, how they then went and figured out how to stretch skins of animals and, as well as having clothing, they turned those logs on their sides and they put the skins around them, and they made drums that made an even more beautiful sound. They would listen to the wind blowing through the trees and they would try and emulate the beautiful sound of God's movement – the Spirit's movement – throughout creation.

So they started blowing instruments, making them try to sound like the beauty of God's creation in this universe. Pretty soon they were able to carve out horns from animals and they would blow through them anything to make sound, to change pitch, to create the soul of music. It led to incredible opportunities.

When they finally learned how to use the gut of animals to make strings – to make opportunities – they turned it into a bow that they used for hunting and they made their arrows and they put the arrow on the bow and they shot it. Everyone who has ever been with someone who has used a bow and arrow, knows that there is pinging sound and the different size of whatever bow you are shooting makes a different sound, and pretty soon they were trying to take the tonality of the bow and recreate it in the harp, and the lyre, and a really cool guitar [laughter].

Music, from the very beginning, was part of a religious expression, as well. You go all the way back to the earliest times of archeological findings and you find instruments. Music was at the very beginning of all that they did. It wasn't just pot shards. There were instruments. There were paintings of people doing music from the earliest times and just about every society in every part of this world. It is in us and it moves through us. That is why even within the Jewish community, the earliest Jewish religion, you find music happening. You go to Psalm 150, the last Psalm, and it is bookended by Psalm one and everything in between is an expression of one and 150. One and 150 both talk about praising God through music. Music is the expression for the earliest faithful Church of the Jewish community or the faith community, and they are celebrating in music. The way they praise God first and foremost is through music and, because, [Psalm] one – [through] 150 define and fill in the Psalms, how we worship God is not as much through obedience as praise – and praise is lived out in music. So music isn't just the entertainment that would make an otherwise pretty boring service – depending especially on who is up here preaching – music is the heart of the experience of worship. It is every bit as integral to the faith of the service as the spoken – written – word. It is who we are in our worship. That is how fundamental music is.

You go to the second Temple period – and remember the first Temple had been destroyed. The people were carried away to Babylon. They have to come back and Ezra is telling them “Don't take the time to rebuild your homes. Stop building your businesses. The second Temple needs to be built first.” And the first thing they did, all the way in Ezra chapter 3, was form a choir. The choir had 200 men and women. That was the most important part of the Temple; it wasn't even the building as much as it was formulating the choir of 200 that

would sing and share and do the worship, and then the building was extended from the music. Choir was a gift, but it was enhanced to encourage the rest of the faith community to hear their own voices in their singing.

Music is used to instruct. Remember that almost everyone during that time was illiterate. They had to learn the Scriptures and, while they didn't have Amazon where you could click and get a book the next day or download it on your Kindle right now, they had to write everything out on paper or papyrus or animal skins. Very rarely did any Temple – or later, synagogue – have any kind of Scripture that it would roll out. They were special if they actually had any kind of written material. The way they learned, whether the priest or the scribe or later the rabbi learned – because they were often illiterate – was through singing the hymns. Singing their theology, singing their Bible, was the way they learned it.

How do we teach little children? They remember the songs they sing far more than what you read to them in the morning and the same thing happened in Church with, by and large, an illiterate community. They sang their faith and that is how they taught. Music is so imbedded in the very fiber of our being and that is how we continue to learn. But more than that, it is how we overcome our struggles, how we share; and, Psalms are full of lament, how we share our frustrations, our fears, our mourning, and our loss. We sing those out and, in the anguish and pain God brings, through the Holy Spirit, a feeling of hope back into our souls, that allows us to continue moving forward. It is also the gift that binds us together. We see that over and over again. We could be separated by prejudice. We could be separated by all sorts of things, but music is what brings us together.

I would like to share this expression giving you an example, because we have all these jazz people up here, I've got to do some examples with jazz. And, I would like to talk about the origin of jazz in New Orleans. I would like to go back to the early 1800's. In New Orleans, at that time, there were three groups of people: there were French, there were the Americans and there were – I am quoting – the “mixed.” The mixed could be anything. Creole, by its very word, meant a mix. Ordinarily there was a white man who dominated a woman who was either Native American, or a slave from either Africa or the Caribbean, and that is how you formed the Creole – that mix. But unlike many places where, especially in the south, where there was extreme prejudice to such a degree, there was, because of music, the opportunity to find the ability to communicate with each other no matter what your background.

That was so blessed in New Orleans. There were two different groups of Native American tribes: both the Chickasaw and the Natchez Indians. They descended. Also New Orleans is descended from the earliest settlers, but there were refugees from Canada, because of French Canada in Quebec, who came down to fight and stayed. There was the French Revolution where they continued to stay after the Napoleonic wars, slave rebellions, people from Haiti, Santa Domingo and other Caribbean areas who had come in, because of it being a port city. It was so rich and [provided a] diversity of music.

New Orleans was also the center of the slave trade, and by the 1830s there were more than two-dozen slave auction houses in the city. Many of them founded spacious ball rooms, so slavery and music occurred simultaneously, side by side, in the same places. They were also in the grandest hotels. You would go in to stay for a night and you would pass through while they were selling human souls; show rooms for human merchandise. Yet also, if you

were a person of color and you were free the only place you were safe was New Orleans. That is where freed people of color went to have any sort of place, where they could live their freedom.

The city was full of music. Dancing was central to New Orleans. The city's Latin, because of the Caribbean and in Catholicism, was full and speaking and celebrating. The Roman Catholic Church in New Orleans embraced the celebration of dance and music, and it was the Protestants who tried to claim that jazz and other forms of music – and especially dancing – were the devil's invention. Well, Protestants didn't sell well in New Orleans. The slaves wouldn't listen. The people of color didn't listen. The people who were Anglo didn't listen and no matter how hard the Protestants preached, they never got a foothold, because others needed – needed in the depth of their bones – to express their faith through music.

Well, before the Civil War there was a real mania for Bob's music on the trumpet. It was amazing how they did it. They had dance bands and then they would turn around, and those same people would go into marching bands. Marching bands were so important because they weren't during football halftime shows. Marching bands were dominantly done – you know if you have ever been there – for funerals. Funerals. The grieving was done in a celebratory tone, because they believed that the soul of the deceased was not in the ground – dead forever. That might have been voodoo for certain parts, but it was certainly Catholic.

Christianity had its foothold in that celebration of new life as well. You had to live in New Orleans to understand why such joy in a funeral service. You just had to look around right outside the city limits. Swamps surrounded it. Even today, if you walk down the French Quarter you know that their sanitation system isn't really good. There were a whole lot of messes, plus annual flooding every single year, and that was even before the latest Katrina flooding. And with all of that water and all of that mess, no wonder that thousands died of yellow fever between 1817-1860. No wonder that cholera and malaria took thousands more.

They knew by living there that their lives would be short. They needed music. They needed the jazz, the joy, the hope, the expression even in their funerals, to know how to celebrate life anew, because the life here was so difficult and short. Music was the way they spoke to God that gave them hope amid all of that suffering, and so they brought music from everywhere they were. The African slaves brought fiddles and fifes. The Jewish people brought harps and triangles and tambourines. That's why I had to have a tambourine on your bulletin cover – they began to appear alongside the African drums and rattles.

Dancing transformed. You had the African dances at first, but then the Caribbean, with their own Latin beats; and, they organized it and brought it together. It was a beautiful melting pot that jazz became part of that expression. I heard someone this morning say “we don't like the word ‘melting pot.’ We like more like a ‘salad’ where you have everything mixed because you don't lose any of the flavors. Everything remains the same. It doesn't mold into one. Everything remains unique and visual and tasty,” That is the music of jazz. You recognize the Latin, you recognize the African, you recognize every other part of it and yet it all fits together in a beautiful, tasty melody that is just so exciting; God bless music.

We Protestants have to learn to re-embrace it – not through worship wars between contemporary and classical – but to embrace the fullness of whatever speaks to us in a way that can transform our hearts, in a way that can fill us with the Holy Spirit, and rather than say, “Well, that ain’t my thing,” take a moment to say, “Why is it somebody else’s thing?”

You may not listen to Big Band music the way my grandmother did every day on the radio, but you can learn to appreciate why she did; because she lost so many friends in World War II, from the little town of Buffalo, North Dakota, and she remembers them in the music. When she listens to that music she remembers the struggles of the Depression, and she remembers laughter and play – even when it was hard – and I have a feeling, to the day she died, she listened to that music, to remind her that even in the bad moments, she can still laugh and play like a kid – even in her 86th year, when her body was shutting down.

Rather than scoff, take a moment and listen to what other people find joyous, even if it’s that syrupy, crap – pop musi – that our kids are listening to [laughter] and figure out why it speaks to them, and maybe, maybe it will fill your heart, once you realize why – the same way it does them, and recognize that it all comes from a God – who speaks to us in a myriad of different ways; because we all come from a different place and need different music to speak to our unique souls – whether we are slaves or free, male or female, white or person of color, whether we are Protestant, Catholic, Muslim, Jewish or something else. To experience everyone’s music, is to experience a deeper fullness of the living God; and that is why we celebrate this music today. Amen