

Improvisation: A Jazz-Shaped Spiritual Life

Matthew 4:16-22

February 27, 2022 Mardi Gras Jazz Sunday

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People sitting out their lives in the dark saw a huge light; Sitting in that dark, dark country of death, they watched the sun come up. This Isaiah-prophesied sermon came to life in Galilee the moment Jesus started preaching. Jesus picked up where John left off: "Change your life. God's kin-dom is here."

Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They didn't ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed. A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John, Zebedee's sons. These two were sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their fishnets. Jesus made the same offer to them, and they were just as quick to follow, leaving their boat and father.

Matthew 4:16-22 The Message

Jazz in worship. Maybe we should do this a little more often. This is one pastor who loves music and who has felt God's presence and the strength to walk the journey of faith through a wide range of music. When my soul and mind are restless, I often turn to music to draw me close to God, the Holy and to other people. So I will try my best not to get in the way of the music this morning.

How does God call us to life, to deeper life? First we must hear a melody from the Holy One. We are loved. We are created in God's image. God shows us who we are to be and how we are to live as we follow the ways of Jesus. We have a purpose. This gives us our basic melody.

Today we are hearing melodies in jazz music, a uniquely American form of music born from the reality and suffering of African American people who were enslaved and working on plantations. When they were living as enslaved people and working in cotton fields, music was one way to survive and feel a different reality. They heard the words of the Bible. People began to clap their hands or tap their feet. The words and hopes became the music of their lives. Calling to each other in the fields. I have much to learn and unlearn about this history. *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song* By Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a book and documentary, has been very helpful to me. Ken Burns' "Jazz" film is also.

Here is what I do know. The melody line is antiphonal in jazz. Call and response. When the trumpeter plays out a line, then the clarinet answers. Jazz, worship.

Think about today's story from Matthew. Jesus called the disciples. They heard in his voice, in his words, in his presence, the melody they were searching for. He invited them to follow him. They did. They left their nets, their lives to respond to this adventure. Life of faith is like that. There is a basic melody. But soon faith, spiritual life, becomes improvisational journey; we take that basic melody and add some harmony – my harmony, my interests, my questions, my hopes, my doubts, my rhythm. But it is not a solo performance. It becomes our rhythm, a community of faith, and other people who encourage me and challenge me.

When I look at sheet music for spirituals and jazz, there are little notes are called grace notes in music. Grace is a gift from the Source of Love that is not earned or deserved. God offers us grace of forgiveness, of peace, of healing, of hope, of new beginnings. As Anne Lamott writes, at some point we have to give up the hope of ever having a better past. God offers us grace that we may begin again with hope and purpose. Grace is an affirmation of God that even if you had trauma in your life, and you are not sure if you are loved, if anyone will believe you, if you are acceptable and precious, you are. If you live with constant regrets or constant fear, Divine grace, offers a new melody.

I felt some of that melody and energy last week when over 150 people gathered here to hear John Philip Newell. We listened to his words. We talked to our neighbor. We listened to chants he had written. There was this ancient melody of Celtic wisdom that people were responding to. Remember what Newell said – “In the beginning was the sound.”

We sense a longing, a calling. We might even hear some grace notes. But we also know there are times of pain. We are worried about Russia's invasion of Ukraine – the incredible acts of war, violence, destruction and death. We worry about our health. We feel the weight of grief and loss. We worry about money, worries about kids or parents or grandparents. Then we begin to improvise on that melody in minor keys, in somber notes.

We begin to understand that spirituality is not simply like learning scales and chords. When Jesus calls the fisherman, he is inviting them into a relationship of being together. He did not hand them a manual of operations for being a disciple. He did not ask them to take an online test to see if they were qualified. He invited them, he called them and something about him made them respond.

Jesus invited them to listen to him, to pray with him, to eat with him, to watch him so they would learn his melody and then take his melody into the world. He also expected them to take that basic melody and then improvise with their own skills and gifts and interests and passions. He wanted them to see all the people around them who thought their song didn't matter, that God's melody did not include them - the poor, the sick, the Samaritans, the lepers, the women, the outsiders. But Jesus came to say that they mattered, that their song was pleasing to God and they were invited to join the big choir and the big band. He wanted

his disciples to share that good news. But unless they knew the basic melody they couldn't improvise and they couldn't invite others to join.

In *Finding the Groove: Composing a Jazz-Shaped Faith*, Robert Gelinias writes -

'A jazz-shaped faith ... balances freedom with boundaries, the individual with the group, and traditions with the pursuit of what might be. I have discovered in jazz a way of thinking, living, communicating---a way of being ... a groove.'

Syncopation. Call-and-response. Creativity. Listening. Freedom within constraints. Gelinias harnesses powerful jazz metaphors to cast a vision for a Christian faith fully alive, embracing creative tension while playing in concert with others.

Improvisation. Our lives progress not by playing predetermined notes, but by improvising in the company of others. Improvisation is not just about spontaneous originality, because good improvisers draw on rich traditions and practice. Improvisation is an apt description of our spiritual practices, and church is our rehearsal studio.

Playing the blues. All jazz is blues. That is, pain and suffering are the native soil of jazz. Jazz is more than music, roots in suffering and longing. A jazz-shaped faith, is a blues-shaped faith. Today we may feel joy and hope alongside our lament. We gather as a congregation and community here in this place and online to hold those together.

Ensemble. You can't play jazz alone. We need community. We need connections. Both require practicing and playing in ensemble, which means listening to others, needing others, becoming who we are because of others. We find our own voice, but that means playing in concert.

Jazz music empowers. It breaks through isolation, leads to reflection and encourages a spirit of community. Those early disciples were like jazz musicians – they heard a sacred melody and responded so they could play together, improvise and make grace filled music in Galilee, on the road to Jericho, on boats in a storm, and on the road to Jerusalem. As we begin our journey through the season of Lent on the way to the empty tomb, may that same melody open our hearts. Amen.