

Sermon

Year A, Proper 23

October 12, 2014

A few weeks ago, Lynn and I went out to eat with Beth and Barry Jones. After dinner, we went to a jazz club as the Jones' guests. It is a little place that Beth likes called the Velvet Note. Though it sounds like it would be in downtown Atlanta, it is actually in Alpharetta, just a few exits south of here.

We settled down in our seats that evening to hear a jazz trombonist named Wycliffe Gordon and his jazz trio; and also a couple of young men who played saxophone whom he invited to join them on stage. The evening was great fun and the music was memorable. There is just something about musicians that I have always admired. It is often described by people as having "soul." Great musicians connect with something deep within their being and then with practice and great care are able to express it in ways that all of us are able to enjoy.

As we sat through the evening, Mr. Gordon would rotate between different instruments—a big trombone, a small trombone, a trumpet, and even being the lead vocalist. He used a "suppressor," which is basically a toilet plunger cap, to adjust the sounds he made with his instruments. He also would step aside at times to let the bass player, drummer, and pianist play their respective solos. One of the really fun times was when the teen saxophonists came up to play, too. It was a night to remember.

All of the musicians had that same quality of "soul"—you could tell by the way their faces and bodies connected to the music, their smiles, the nodding of their heads, and the tapping of their feet. They were expressing their soul through their music—and we the audience were getting to share and enjoy the experience with them.

After that evening, I thought to myself, "How do I express my soul?" How do you express your soul? Some of us are musicians, too. Jeff of course, as our chief parish musician; and the members of the choir; Tom McDonnell; Br. Kenneth; and others among us are people who can relate to fellow musicians like Wycliffe Gordon and the other musicians we saw and heard that evening at the Velvet Note. Some of us may be secret musicians—we sing in the shower or in the car; or maybe we play an instrument at home.

Of course there are other ways to express our soul. Some use painting or sculpting, writing a poem, or working in a garden. The way we do it matters less than the fact that we connect with and express our inner life in some way. It is an essential part of being human and

of fulfilling God's intention for us. As the ancient theologian Irenaeus stated it, "The glory of God is a human person fully alive."

This morning I'd like to offer you a different and perhaps unexpected way of to think about expressing your soul—how you give. You see, what you do with your money is one of the biggest indications of who you are and how you express your soul. We may think of money as the opposite of "soul." Money is used for things like paying bills and taxes and so forth. How is that like playing jazz trombone or writing a poem? Let me explain. Let's first consider music.

Expressing our souls through music is made up of different components. One large part is simply a gift from God—whatever your natural abilities are to perform, from perfect pitch to a clear voice, to the ability to use your hands and feet to play your instrument. Some folks have certain gifts that give them the potential to express their soul through music.

But as any gifted person will also tell you, there is a lot of work involved. That bassist at the jazz club looked really cool. But I wonder how many hours he practiced with his instrument; how often he had to drag that big fiddle on a bus or in a car to go to practice or a concert. That effort was probably a lot less cool at the time than his time on the stage.

And to be an expression of "soul," musicians eventually will need some type of audience. Whether fellow musicians practicing together; or one or two friends listening to you at home; or performing in a crowded concert hall; in order to be a full expression of our souls, music involves connecting with other people.

So let's consider giving as an expression of our soul. Some of us, just like musicians, have natural gifts in this area. St. Paul wrote that some people have a gift of giving and that they should give generously. The people with the gift of giving may surprise you—they may not be the richest among us, but they are people who can give in an inconspicuous way in order to meet important needs. Their giving is an expression of their inner life and also what they give serves the common good; just like a jazz musician expresses his soul and connects with and inspires his audience as he plays.

But just like the gifted musician, even those of us with the gift of giving had to learn what to do over years of practice. How it began for us probably differs with each gifted giver—perhaps they heard the story of a great philanthropist and something connected with them, just like when a future musician heard the first player that inspired them to play. Or maybe they saw a parent who gave consistently and they aspired to give like Mom and Dad.

However it happened, at some point, the giver learned to give. When I was a child, I remember putting my nickels and dimes in an offering envelope for church. I remember the phrase printed on it (a phrase our bishop often repeats), "God loves a cheerful giver." From an

early age, I learned that giving was a part of life that helped us connect at a deeper level with our own soul and with other people. And I began to practice giving over my lifetime.

So giving is a way to express our soul. But there are challenges that many of us have about giving. It is similar to what some of us say about music—“Oh, that’s great for Jeff and the choir, but I can’t sing.” Well I will tell you what Jeff tells me—anyone can sing. And in the same way, we can all learn to give; and give generously as a way to express our inner life to the glory of God and for the good of others.

In order to learn to give as an expression of our soul, we all need to learn, practice, and receive reinforcement in two main areas:

The most important area is **realizing that all you have—all you have—is a gift from God**. That God-orientation enables us to be generous and ungrudging in our giving because it deals with our fears of not having enough. Of course, we still need to be grown-ups and be sure we can pay our bills and have a budget. But a key part of “soul-based giving” is trust that God provides for us. Second, when we realize all that we have comes from God, it connects us to people beyond ourselves and our immediate family. Our wealth and income are gifts from God and we are stewards of those gifts through how we share them with others.

And second, just like a gifted musician practices his playing, **we must learn to practice our giving** in big and small ways over weeks and months and years. As we practice giving, we learn by participating in the virtuous cycle of God’s generosity to us and through us to other people. It is an old saying, but true—“you cannot out-give God.” And over time, our faithful practice inspires our creativity to express our soul through giving. Just like jazz musicians gain confidence over time and are able to do more improvisation; so givers can do more and more as an expression of God’s life coursing through their soul.

In our common life and culture, church is a “soul” place. Church is a unique place where we can learn and practice how to express our soul. I have heard clergy and church musicians remind us of how few places there are in life where we can gather to sing together. Church is a place where not just the choir, but all of us, can meet together from week to week and practice our singing.

Church is also a unique place to learn to give. We are often bombarded by many worthy organizations to give to one cause or another (and each of us should follow our conscience on where and how to give to those organizations). But when we give first to our local parish, we give to a place that is “hands on” for us. We know the people who work here, we use the facilities, and we work together for a common purpose as we participate in God’s mission together in and through this place. Church is a unique place for us to learn and practice giving to a trustworthy institution and for a most worthy cause as people of faith.

Today is Stewardship Sunday for our parish. Today we begin our annual giving campaign to help our vestry, treasurer, and I plan for the parish budget in 2015. There are many exciting things going on in and through our parish. Tom McDonnell and the Stewardship Committee will be reminding us of the details of those ministries and opportunities over the next two months. We hope their message and our own personal participation in our common life and ministry will inspire us to give generously to continue and increase what we are able to do together.

Also, as we plan our personal giving for the operations of the church next year—and very probably for a coming capital stewardship campaign—I hope we will consider our giving as more than an obligation. Instead, in our prayers and conversation, in our time of reflection and decision, I hope we will see our giving as a way to connect more deeply with our souls—that life deep inside of us that only God knows fully—and express our soul through our giving like a symphony of generosity to the glory of God and for the good of our community.

Amen.