

**The Heartbeat of God**  
NCJ Conference Episcopal Address  
July 14, 2016  
Peoria, IL  
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When the college assigned me the task of giving the Episcopal Address at this 2016 North Central Jurisdictional Conference, I admit that the thought of this task was a bit daunting.

We have such great preachers here in the North Central Jurisdiction:

- preachers who can inspire and call to action;
- preachers who can see the trends and the statistical direction of our jurisdiction and general church;
- preachers who can parse scripture and bring it to life;
- preachers who are visionaries and can help us see the future God sees for us.

So, yes – I found this invitation daunting.

I also knew that the 2016 General Conference was likely to be a watershed General Conference:

- one that would once again bring us to the edge of schism – if not over that edge;
- one that would – again – be filled with pain and frustration, winners and losers.

So, ... I struggled.

What could I possibly say here today that has not already been said before – and probably said much more eloquently than I could say?

What ‘Word’ could I bring that would remind us of the Good News of Jesus Christ that overarches all our differences?

What Hope could I offer that reminds us ‘Who we are’, and ‘Whose we are’?

How could I possibly express the powerful healing presence of God to hurting, anxiety-filled, frightened United Methodists, for whom the future is uncertain?

I couldn’t seem to find the right words. And that’s a scary thought to a preacher!

Because I love words! I love the power and images they can portray.

In fact, in preparing for today, I did a quick, general count of the number of words I have preached in my 42 years since my ordination as a deacon.

- with a rough estimate of about 2500 words per sermon;
- and approximately 48 Sundays per year I was in the local church;
- plus the sermons I have preached since serving as a DS and Bishop;

I came up with nearly 3 million words.

And that doesn't count funerals, weddings, keynote addresses, and those times we are asked to just 'say a few words.'

Three million words? Really?

As I said, I love words. I believe in the power and beauty of words. But sometimes words just can't do it for me. Sometimes I need something more visceral – something that goes beyond the concreteness of those words.

Especially in this time of uncertainty, there is an inherent desire of human beings to try to make sense out of the chaos and questions of our lives – and our faith.

And I just couldn't find the right words to get at that ongoing disquiet we seem to feel today ... an underlying fear that is permeating our lives – our faith – and our church.

So when words fail, we seek deeper ways to make sense of life.

Reinhold Niebuhr:

*"There are some things in theology you can't say with words."*

That's where I am.

Maybe ... just maybe ... our hearts today need to hear the message of Jesus Christ in a different way.

Maybe ... just maybe ... we can experience the Good News of Christ through something other than words.

Maybe ... just maybe ... there is another way we can sense the healing, encompassing presence of God.

Maybe ... just maybe ... today we can experience the Hope of the Good News instead of just talking about it.

So I turned to something that, for me, goes deeper than words ... music.

Hans Christian Anderson:

*"Where words fail, music speaks."*

That's why worship must be more than just words.

That's why there is something unifying and uplifting when we lift our voices together in song.

That's why even in the midst of great chaos, it is often music that comes to our hearts, our souls, and our lips.

Theologian, author and educator, Dr. Marva Dawn, puts it this way:

*Music, songs, sermons, liturgical form, architecture, are all means by which God invites, reveals, and forms us.*

(from "A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World")

*"Where words fail, music speaks."*

In September, 2014, Karl Paulnack, a noted pianist, gave the Welcome Address to the incoming freshmen at Boston's Conservatory of Music. His words have become something of a classic.

In that address he says that the ancient Greeks believed music and astronomy were two sides of the same coin. Astronomy was seen as the study of relationships between observable, external objects. And music was seen as the study of relationships between invisible, internal, hidden objects. They believed that music has a way of finding the big, invisible, moving pieces inside our hearts and souls, and helping us figure out what's going on inside.

He goes on to share this story:

*In September of 2001 I was a resident of Manhattan. On the morning of September 12, 2001 ... I sat down at the piano ... to practice as was my daily routine; ... I lifted the cover on the keyboard, and opened my music, and put my hands on the keys and took my hands off the keys. And I sat there and thought, does this even matter? Isn't this completely irrelevant? Playing the piano right now, given what happened in this city yesterday, seems silly, absurd, irreverent, pointless. ... What place has a musician in this moment in time? ... I was completely lost.*

*I did not play the piano that day, and in fact I contemplated briefly whether I would ever want to play ... again. And then I observed how we got through the day.*

*At least in my neighborhood, we didn't shoot hoops or play Scrabble. We ... didn't watch TV, we didn't shop, we most certainly did not go to the mall. The first organized activity that I saw in New York, on the very evening of September 11th, was singing. People sang. People sang around fire houses, people sang "We Shall Overcome". Lots of people sang America the Beautiful.*

*The first organized public event that I remember was the Brahms Requiem, later that week, at Lincoln Center ... The first organized public expression of grief, our first communal response to that historic event, was a concert. ... The US Military secured the airspace, but recovery was led ... by music ... that very night.*

*From these two experiences, I have come to understand that music is not part of "arts and entertainment" ... It's not a luxury, a lavish thing that we fund from leftovers of our budgets, ... Music is a basic need of human survival. Music is one of the ways we make sense of our lives, one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words, a way for us to understand things with our hearts when we can't with our minds.*

Let me repeat that:

*Music is one of the ways we make sense of our lives, one of the ways in which we express feelings when we have no words, (one of the ways) for us to understand things with our hearts when we can't with our minds.*

Maybe ... just maybe ... that's what I need today instead of words.

Maybe ... just maybe ... it's what we all need today.

Jeremy Begbie, in his book, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*, shares some fascinating insights into a theology of music.

He talks about a pattern in musical structure called Equilibrium – Tension – Resolution ... ETR. A pattern that is, by the way, also prevalent in the human existence.

We go along smoothly = **Equilibrium**

Something happens that brings chaos, disruption, and uncertainty = **Tension**

Eventually we find a way through that disruption = **Resolution**

It's a journey of sorts – one that is familiar in our lives – and throughout the Biblical texts.

- Creation – Fall – Redemption
- Promised Land – Exile – Return
- The journey of the Prodigal Son: Home – Far land – Return home
- Life – Death – Resurrection.

Music has these same rhythms – **Equilibrium – Tension – Resolution**. It's these rhythms that keep the music moving forward – that keep it from becoming boring or repetitive. Music can't be just a straight line from beginning to end. Nor is it just a series of ETRs – over and over until the end.

But music reminds us that, as much as we would prefer not to experience the "Tensions" that come with life (and faith) and just live a simple, uncomplicated, non-chaotic existence – it isn't possible. Life isn't like that.

Our lives – or the life of the church.

Marty Linsky has said:

*"A great piece of music makes beauty out of chaos."*

Music (remember the Greeks here – finding the pieces within us and helping us figure them out) teaches us not to hurry through the tension, but to find joy and fulfillment in the midst of the struggle. In music (as in life) you can't pass over the Tension. You have to pass through it.

William Sloane Coffin wrote (in his book, *Once to Every Man*):

*In times of utter desolation, (only) God alone has comforted me more (than music has); and when the world seems bent on madness, its music ... reassures me of its sanity."*

One final thought:

In a painting you can have two separate colors on the canvas – but they can't exist in the same space without becoming something else. Blue and red in the same space become purple. Red and yellow become orange.

But the miracle of music is that you can have two different notes occupying the same space – each quite different from the other – but you don't lose the uniqueness of each note.

Together they make the whole richer and deeper. One enhances the other.

Now, let me say that again ... but listen to how it relates to the church ... and where we are as the United Methodist Church.

The miracle of music is that you can have two different notes occupying the same space – each quite different from the other – but you don't lose the uniqueness of each note.

Together they make the whole richer and deeper. One enhances the other

Listen to how Jeremy Begbie describes this:

*If I play a note on a piano – say, a middle C – what I hear fills the whole of my heard space. I cannot identify some zone where the heard note is and a zone where it is not. I do not say "It is here but not here." ...*

*If I play a second note along with the middle C – say, the E above it – that second note also fills the whole of my heard space, the same space as the C. Yet I hear the notes as distinct from each other. The notes interpenetrate, occupy the same heard space, but I can hear them as two notes. ...*

*Here is not the space of mutual exclusion but a space that allows for overlapping and interpenetration. ...*

*Suppose I play middle C and open up the string an octave above by silently depressing the appropriate key. The upper C string will vibrate even though it has not been struck. ... The strings are not in competition, nor do they simply allow each other room to vibrate. The lower string enhances and brings to life the upper string, freeing it to be itself and compromising neither the integrity of the upper string nor its own.*

Now there's a lesson for us all.

- “the strings are not in competition”
- “nor do they simply allow each other room to vibrate”
- “the one string enhances and brings life to the other”
- “freeing it to be itself and compromising neither the integrity of the other – nor its own.”

**“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (I Cor. 12:26-27)**

Maybe ... just maybe ... music can touch the invisible parts of our hearts and souls, ... and it can teach us something about the world as God has created it ... as God sees it ... as God hopes it can be.

So today I want to offer you a gift – a gift that helps me get in touch with the ‘invisible, moving pieces’ inside my heart and soul.

The gift of music.

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The piece I will play for you is the second movement of Beethoven's Sonata #7 in D major. This piece has been an important part of my life and faith story. Let me share what I hear when I play this piece.

When I first learned this piece I was told the story (which may be apocryphal) that Beethoven wrote this particular movement at the time he realized he was going deaf. If you listen carefully you will hear the agony of that realization in the tension and unresolved chords and movements of the early part of this piece. Just imagine how devastating it would be to have your soul filled with the beauty and genius of the music Beethoven created ... but also knowing the day was coming when you would no longer be able to physically hear the music itself.

So the piece begins with struggle – with wrestling with the sadness and frustration and fear ... something we all know too well, both in our lives, in our faith, and in our beloved United Methodist Church.

Then, part way through, you begin to hear a quiet beat in the left hand. A steady, constant beat. A heartbeat, if you will. The heartbeat of God.

That steady beat continues, but in different keys and in different ways. You have to listen a little more carefully for it, but it's there. You can still hear the fear – the pain – the chaos ... but God's heartbeat is still there.

We then return to a reprise of the opening measures – with the agony and the unresolved chords. But slowly ... slowly the heartbeat is heard again – underlying the agony. It won't let go. And that heartbeat builds in momentum and volume.

Then a breath – a silence.

And the music returns ... beautiful – haunting.

Until finally – all is peace.

God.