

“Knitting Our Souls”

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Script: Psalm 139: 1-18, Mark 1:9-14

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When Suzie asked me to preach today, she said that I could preach on whatever I wanted to—no theme to coordinate with, no direction to focus my efforts. Those of you who’ve been around here long enough to remember my preaching on a regular basis know that that’s an unwise license to offer me. So here we go. I hope that where we go together in this time is worthwhile.

Often, unhealthy Christian teaching presents humans only in negative terms; (that seems to be a favorite indoor sport for some preachers). Humans are framed in terms of being fallen or sinful... the focus is on original sin rather than original blessing. I think what is revealed in those attempts tells us less about the Scriptures and more about the preacher’s self-image and their own inner struggles. It makes me wonder if they think they are better at sinning than God is at forgiving, or if they’ve never heard of God’s love, and if so, do they believe it?

So, let me start in a different place. In one of the creation stories in Genesis God proclaims humans and creation as “very good.” In the other creation story (Genesis 2), God says, “Let us make humans in our image,” and then are charged to complete creation. In the Psalms (Psalm 8) we find that we are created to be “little less than God,” and crowned us with glory and honor. And in the reading for today the Psalm writer says: *“For it was you [God] who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”*

What if we took these affirmations of our goodness and worth seriously? What does it mean to say that we are created in God’s own image?

What comes to mind immediately is the shock I experience nearly every morning as I walk into the bathroom with its life-sized mirror and see my Dad staring back at me.

Part of what it means to believe we are created in God's image is to recognize that we resemble God, and if God is creator, then it must mean that we create too. We are intended to be creators who help not dominate, but complete creation.

From our earliest of days we create: we play, draw, build blocks, build forts, we dance (without anyone teaching us how), we sing songs we make up with melodies and lyrics from our imaginations. We tell stories, we fantasize and imagine great things. While I was in elementary school, I found escape and comfort in the face of academic failure by getting straight A's in day-dreaming...which didn't further help my regular grades. But we create as children, continuously.



And now I'm going to break one of the rules of preaching. I'm going to use a source material—a quote, that I've used before. But it is so good, and you won't remember it from a couple of years ago, and after all—what are you going to do? I'm retired.

Let me re-introduce you to Arvo Pärt. He is a classical composer who lives in Estonia. He writes music for orchestra and choirs and also composes works for organ and chamber music. His work is deeply sacred and is categorized as “minimalist,” using silence, space and utilizes very gradual modulations—evolutions in musical themes. Leaving out notes and letting silence do its thing.

From his musical diary:

“The most sensitive musical instrument is the human soul. The next is the human voice.

One must purify the soul until it begins to sound. A composer is a musical instrument and at the same time a performer on that instrument. The instrument has to be in order to produce sound. One must start with that, not with the music. Through the music the composer can check whether his instrument is tuned, and to what key it is tuned.

God knits man in his mother's womb, slowly and wisely. Art should be born in a similar way. To be like a beggar when it comes to writing music, whatever, however, and whenever God gives.”

I'd like to suggest that today we think about our lives as music or art. Our role, our vocation, our purpose, is to create. Our whole lives are creations: from the relationships we forge with spouses, friends, children, to the places we fashion in our homes, places of worship, our gardens; to the physical things we create with food, lumber, concrete, and thread; to the realities we create with others—environments where people find food, medical care, education and enrichment; to creating churches, communities, schools and governments that care for the inclusion, rights, opportunities and dignity of all people and creatures—these are all acts of creation. Everyone of us is an artist.

The Gospel lesson today is near the very beginning of Mark's Gospel. Most scholars believe Mark was the first one to write a Gospel. It is the shortest of them, and in it things happen quickly. The word "immediately" occurs 42 times—more than the whole rest of the New Testament. When Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels, they had a copy of Mark in front of them and used it as a framework and added additional stories and material to suit their own congregation's needs.

Unlike the other Gospels, Mark begins his Gospel, not with a genealogy tracing Jesus back to King David or Adam, nor with stories of miraculous conceptions, bright stars or angel choruses, seeking to impress upon us how special Jesus is.

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee...and was baptized by John in the river Jordan."

Afterwards, dripping wet on the slippery, muddy banks of the creek, "he saw the heavens *torn* apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him." He gets the message at age 30 (or so) that he is God's son, God's beloved.

Before he has a chance to think about what that means the Spirit of God drives him immediately into the wilderness (40 days is Bible-code for "a long time"). This wilderness testing is something our native friends would recognize as a spirit quest. Jesus needed that time to discern what it means to be God's beloved son. In other terms—to be created in God's own image.

In that time (according to Luke and Matthew who seek to satisfy our curiosity about it) Jesus considered various ways of being God's son; political power...using magic to coerce belief...and fulfilling humanity's material needs—tempting to be sure, in a place of

continual hunger. Purification is smelting out or filtering out what shouldn't be there—knowing what notes to leave out, when to let silence do its thing.

This wilderness time was a purification. It is what Arvo Pärt speaks of: “The most sensitive musical instrument is the human soul...one must purify the soul until it begins to sound...the instrument has to be in order to produce sound.” Purified, Jesus walked out of those hills and sounded from his soul about the Good News.

What does this “purification” look like for you and me? In our acts of creation, whatever it is—what we give our life energies to—how can we ensure it is in-tune with the Spirit? Because we all know we can make bad music—we can make ugly art—our life's energies can be given to destructive things.

You will be glad to hear that I don't have a fleshed-out grand three-point sermon answer to that. But I think that Jesus and Arvo Pärt give us some good hints. I think it begins with humility and openness—openness to life itself and God's leading. It entails a willingness (not willfulness) to become, as St. Francis wrote, “an instrument of peace.” I think it means we must develop and sharpen our spiritual senses, or “the eyes of the heart,” as it says in Ephesians.

Returning to Arvo Pärt's musical diary:

In the Puhtitsa Monastery, Estonia, “Have you thanked God for this failure already?” These unexpected words were said by a little girl. I remember exactly...it was July 25th, 1976. I was sitting in the monastery's yard, on a bench in the shadow of the bushes with my notebook.

‘What are you doing? What are you writing there’, the girl who was around ten asked me. ‘I am trying to write music, but it is not turning out well’, I said. And then the unexpected words from her,

‘Have you thanked God for this failure already?’

As you listen to the rest of this quote, as he writes of music, I encourage you to insert your own life's work...

We shouldn't grieve because of writing little and poorly, but because we pray little and poorly, and lukewarmly, and live in the wrong way. The criterion must be everywhere and only humility.

Music is my friend, ever-understanding. Compassionate. Forgiving. It's a comforter, the handkerchief for drying my tears of sadness, the source of my tears of joy. My liberation and flight. But also, a painful thorn in my flesh and soul, that which makes me sober and teaches humility.

Our life's creative work, whatever it is—our vocation, brings joys and struggles. It is real. Yet is filled with a beauty we often cannot behold while up close.

There is an art exercise used with children where each child is given a blank sheet of paper and a pencil. The instructor tells them to place the pencil tip in the center of the paper, close their eyes, and then gives them two seconds to draw a scribble.

The papers are then randomly exchanged between the students, and the crayons are brought out. The assignment is to create something of beauty and order out of the scribble someone else made. Not an easy assignment. There are lines that are straight and geometric. Others are organic and chaotic. But with openness, willingness, and attention to their inner sight, those children begin to fill in shades of color, add more lines, details and flourishes, and an image emerges from the flat paper. Something of beauty built upon the scribbled chaos.

We, all of us, were born into a chaotic scribble that was given to us. Our life's work is to create something of beauty out of its limitations and opportunities. Our given genetics, life circumstances, and traumas all pose limitations to what we can create. (If we are honest, we have to say that some of us are given scribbles that are more difficult to work with than others.)

Yet, emerging into this given scribble is the equally-given image of God, deep within our souls, seeking order, beauty and agency. With openness, willingness, humility and God's grace, even our failures and darker shades find their place in the artwork of our lives.

May we find the grace of God molding our impulses, flourishes... further into the image deep within—something of beauty and grace for God and all God's creatures. So be it. Amen.