

July 26, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [1 Corinthians 2:1–5, 7–9](#)

TITLE: What No Ear Has Heard

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

No one knows exactly when Ludwig van Beethoven was born. According to church records, he was baptized on December 17, 1770, so he was likely born a day or two before then. This year marks 250 years since his birth. Earlier we sang the hymn “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” which is based on the final movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. And you heard me play a bit from his “Moonlight” Sonata and from his late piano sonata op. 109.

In the early 20th century, the Austrian pianist Arthur Schnabel was the foremost interpreter of Beethoven’s piano music. On several occasions, he performed all 32 of Beethoven’s piano sonatas. Once he was asked, “Why this devotion to Beethoven?” to which he replied, “I am attracted only to music which I consider to be better than it can be performed.” There is truth in Schnabel’s words. I have been playing the piano since I was seven years old, yet there is still so much for me to learn. I still find new beauty in pieces I learned decades ago. Like Schnabel said, Beethoven’s music, like that of other famous composers, is better than it can be performed. Something is there that exceeds our knowledge and ability; yet because we can learn the notes and come close to expressing its beauty, our lives are immeasurably enriched.

The feeling of being part of something that is bigger and more beautiful than we can express isn’t limited to music. It is there in the wonder of a blank canvas that becomes a work of art, a blank piece of paper that comes to hold a poem or a page from a novel. It is there in seeds we plant that become gardens; it is there in teachers’ lessons that fill the minds of their students and bear fruit far beyond what the instructors mastered in their own lives. Something is at work in this world that goes beyond what our eyes see, what our ears hear, and what our minds can imagine. There is something more—something divine, literally from heaven—at work all around us.

Now for those of you who shudder to remember hours spent on a piano bench trying to hit the right notes as you practiced your scales, there is no denying that for most of us moments of musical beauty were few and far between. Practicing for hours doesn’t guarantee that great music will emerge later. Following the recipe precisely doesn’t mean the soufflé won’t fall or the turkey won’t be dry. Careful planting of a flower garden doesn’t mean there won’t be stalks that refuse to blossom. Yet through it all, we practice, we cook, we plant—because life is not guaranteed. It is not transactional. At its heart, life—especially the life of faith—is aspirational.

Aspirational. Much of our life is spent making transactions. We commit to doing a set number of tasks at work and for that we are compensated a salary. We purchase a car or a house by signing a document and agreeing to make a set number of payments over several years. Our lives are shaped by transactions, but our lives are not defined by transactions. Something deeper, richer, more aspirational gives our lives their

meaning. You practice the piano not to memorize a set number of notes but to make music. You stand next to a person and say wedding vows not to finalize a contract but to build a loving life together. You teach children in classrooms not to earn a paycheck but to pass on a love of learning that will guide them all the years to come.

This week I happened to speak to a man whose daughter had recently separated from her husband. One of his granddaughters told him that she wished her parents would get back together. The man commented to her that he too was praying that they might be reconciled. Then the nine year old quietly asked him, “How do you pray?” There is so much wrapped up in that simple question. Its answer was about much more than learning a spiritual technique. The man told his granddaughter that in his experience prayer has four parts to it. It is about saying “thank you;” it’s about saying what is on our heart that we want God to know about and help with; and it’s then naming what we hope the future may be like for those we love and for the world around us. Prayers also include times of silence, as we picture God being near to us and God’s arms holding us safe. What that grandfather offered to his granddaughter was so much more than a quick answer. He offered her an invitation to trust, to pray for better things to come, and to remember that even amid all life’s mistakes and wrong notes, there is something bigger, more loving, and more beautiful all around us.

The apostle Paul didn’t want to go to the non-Jews in Greece at first. But persuaded by a vision, he left the cities of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea and headed to the Greek cities of Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens. In Athens he walked through the marketplace—a place crowded with stalls of people selling their goods, bartering over prices and haggling over currency rates of exchange. Near by altars were set up to honor an array of gods—idols brought back from lands these merchant-sailors had visited in their travels. Just as transactions were hammered out in the marketplace, transactions would be made with these idols. Offerings of food, flowers, or coins would be laid at their feet or paid to their priests, hoping to win the favor of these foreign gods.

In that place Paul began to preach not about a transactional god, but an aspirational God—one unknown to them; the One who made heaven and earth, who doesn’t live in shrines but instead gives hope to all as revealed in the good news of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Paul eventually left Athens and landed in Corinth. Once more he saw their markets, their idols, and their fascination with esoteric wisdom and religious philosophies. But he refused to play by those rules. Instead he preached to them about Jesus of Nazareth—the Jewish rabbi and miracle worker who was crucified, yet who was raised to life that his message and grace might give us hope for this life and the life to come.

Remember what Paul later wrote to the Corinthian church? I Corinthians 2 says, *I didn’t come proclaiming lofty words or wisdom. I decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. My speech and my proclamation were not with words of wisdom, but [relied on God’s] Spirit and power so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.* To paraphrase what Schnabel said earlier, Paul was committed to share a gospel with them that is infinitely better than it can be preached or performed.

As Paul went on to say, this gospel is more than what words can express, more than eyes can see or ears hear or human hearts conceive; this is what God has prepared for us and longs to give us through God's own grace and Holy Spirit.

Paul didn't say these things to make us feel discouraged—that God's truth is beyond human wisdom. No, just the opposite. Paul tells us to shake off our dependence on how things are, the contractual, transactional nature of life that too often leads to division and distrust, racism and fear—and to put on the nature of Christ that far exceeds all we can think or imagine. The British theologian Rowan Williams put it this way: *Jesus did not come to be a competitor for space in the world. Rather in his life, death, and resurrection the human map is being redrawn, the world turned upside down, and all rivalry and defensiveness is called into question.*¹

We remember this week the life and witness of Civil Rights leader John Lewis. He accomplished much in his years of public service. The images that come to mind are when he and the other activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee sat at the segregated lunch counters in Nashville, facing horrendous abuse; or in 1965 when he led 600 peaceful protesters across the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, Alabama, only to be beaten and left for dead for his audacious witness. The calls for justice John Lewis, C.T. Vivian and others offered were not just other voices in the marketplace. It was a proclamation of something entirely new—a world beyond the thrall of racism, a beloved community shaped by the gospel of a crucified, risen Christ. In March of this year, Lewis returned to Pettus bridge and we need to still hear his prophetic words of challenge: “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.”

During this terrible Covid-19 season, we need to be people of hope and faith. But our faith is not transactional; it is aspirational. It is the aspiration that guides a grandfather to teach his granddaughter how to pray. It is the aspiration that refuses to let violence and injustice be the currency of our culture. It is the aspiration built around a simple story long told—about a man of peace of love, in whom the fullness of God dwelt; who endured rejection and crucifixion, but by whose resurrection a gift and power were set forth in this world to change us for the good forever.

I began by playing some piano music—the second piece being a portion of one of Beethoven's last piano sonatas. It is the opening of the 3rd movement of Sonata op. 109. It uses a simple melody that Beethoven later developed into a complex theme and variations. So why is this appropriate for us today? By the time Beethoven was in his 40s, he was totally deaf—a condition likely caused by lead poisoning due to lead commonly used in glassware and wine bottles of his time. Beethoven never heard many of his greatest works. He never heard the Ode to Joy in his Ninth Symphony. He never heard his Missa Solemnis or his final string quartets. And he never heard—literally, personally never heard his op. 109 sonata. But you can. We can. Something written 200 years ago unheard by its composer has been given to you—that you may be blessed and encouraged for the journey ahead. And even more powerful, something done, a life lived 2000 years ago—continues to transform lives, yours and mine, in ways that no eye

has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has fully comprehended. Yet it is true. Trust and believe and be at peace.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Roger Gench essay, "Pastoral Perspective – I Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16); Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, p. 330; quoting Rowan Williams *Christ on Trial*, 2000 pp. 6,52,69.