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“The silence between the music.”

The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (02/11/2024, The Last Sunday after the Epiphany)

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Let us pray.

Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be found acceptable in your sight.

O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer, in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

It's sort of become a commonplace to talk about how there are no large cultural moments anymore.

You know, our media landscape is so fragmented.

We all kind of watch the things that we watch, and it's not like the final episode of

Mash in the 70s where, you know, more than half the entire country tuned in to see the same thing at the same time.

I hear there's an event today that may or may not sort of be one of these cultural moments.

You think about the Super Bowl as maybe the last vestige of this sort of thing in our society.

A few weeks ago was the Grammys, which tends not to be this large cultural moment that everybody tunes into, but there was something that happened at the Grammys, and I want to talk about it briefly this morning.

You've got a fast car, I want it together anywhere, maybe we make it to you, maybe together

we can get somewhere in places better, starting from zero, got nothing to lose, maybe we'll

make something, be myself, I got nothing to prove.

You've got a fast car, I've got a plane inside a hearbin' organ and a keystone, men

at the stage tuned up in a mud, born up the drop to fall, just across

the border and
in the city and you and I can both die by the sea, what do you mean to
me to pay?

A couple of great things, I wish we could watch the whole thing.

There are a couple of great things that are happening here.

First of all, you need to know that the person you saw first is Tracy
Chapman, and she originally

recorded this song in 1988, a fast car, and it was a hit back then,
but Tracy Chapman

remained unfortunately a bit more obscure in recent years, she's been
a little bit more

reclusive, and Luke Holmes, this sort of 33 year old up and coming
country star, re-recorded

her song and sort of represented it for a new audience, and Chapman's
been pretty positive

about this re-recording of her music, but it was still a pretty big
deal that she agreed

to show up and to perform it alongside of Luke Holmes.

It became this kind of cultural moment, Peter Wander, the Atlantic, he
says, the song went

viral, people took to social media to say they were crying, but not
quite knowing why.

Someone else, Lindsay Zolads, who used to cultural credit for the New
York Times, she said

what I noticed was the joy radiating from Tracy Chapman's face, her
contented smile,

the unwavering tone and rich steadiness of her voice.

And finally she added that having Chapman, a 59 year old African
American woman in

Holmes, a 33 year old white man appearing together seemed to transcend
the divisions

of our current cultural moments.

She said it was a rare reminder of music's unique ability to
obliterate external differences.

The song is about something more internal and more universal, the song
about the wants

and needs that make us human, the desire to be happy, to be loved, to
be free.

So I think a couple of fascinating things are happening in a
performance like this.

What is the song itself, which we just heard a bit of?

This song has this simple melody, it doesn't really take up more than
about five or six

notes.

It sort of goes in a circle, and the song is about being trapped in
circles and cycles

of poverty, and once.

So it's a great song.

Another layer is the singer herself, Tracy Chapman, who at some level,
especially in

this performance, was really embodying this song.
It became incarnate in her, right?
This song that she had written, and we sort of all got to see that for just a moment.
She was that song that she wrote all those years ago.
And she seemed to be performing it with gratitude for her life and for what she's been able to accomplish.
And then there was Luke Holmes, carefully performing in such a way as to avoid the optics of a young white male taking over and appropriating the song of an older black female, showing that it's her genius, her music, her writing, that he is admiring and representing to a new generation and a new audience.
Today our story from the gospel is a tricky one, one that always comes at the end of this season after Epiphany and right before Ash Wednesday and Lentz.
We always have the story of Jesus' transfiguration right here in the church calendar.
And it's a strange story.
It's highly symbolic.
Jesus appears to three of his closest friends on a mountain top.
His clothing glows brilliantly, and these two great prophets of the Old Testament, Elijah and Moses join him.
And what really should happen at this point is that they should die. I mean, really, they are in the presence of holiness.
They are in the presence of glory, you know, in the Greek myths, you know, if a God were to manifest that God's self to a human being, they would die.
In the Old Testament, even it says, no one shall see me and live. They don't die.
And in fact, Peter wants to extend the moment and capture it sort of a polaroid moment.
He wants to build these dwelling places on top of the mountain.
He wants to stay there.
And then they're overshadowed by a fog.
And they hear the voice of God speak.
This is my son, the beloved, listen to him.
And then everyone else disappears and they see only Jesus.
Transfiguration is the word, then, that we use to describe this story.
And it has something to do with God's glory being revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.
But what does it mean and what does it mean for us?
My friend Rowan Williams is going to help us out.
He wrote a book on icons of the transfiguration.
So you can see this icon here.
And most icons of the transfiguration are written in much the same way, the same sort of

visual dynamic.

So we'll talk about this for a moment.

But he says this, when we listen to a great performer, you're already thinking of Tracy

Chapman, I hope.

We can sometimes sense that all of their energy in life at the moment of that performance

is held and sustained by a great current of music that is becoming presence and immediate

in their actions.

In other words, the line between the performer and the music begins to blur.

And for a few moments, we see something happening that's kind of like transfiguration.

We've been said in that quote I read a few minutes ago that Tracy Chapman's face seemed

to be glowing almost.

Something deep spiritual, something immaterial is becoming real and embodied and a person

who is standing right before us.

They don't stop being themselves, but at the same time, they also become more than just

themselves.

He puts it this way.

You can't separate them from the movement of the music, their present reality, their

muscles, their nerves and breath and mind, all of their physical attributes are shot through

with the music's life.

They are carried on its tide.

And when you watch a performance like that, it kind of becomes an eternal moment.

You almost have to wake yourself up when the song is over because you've been sort of

riding this timeless wave.

So this is something like what happens in the transfiguration stories in the Gospels.

They're showing us what it looks like when the music of God, the life of God, the love

of God, the presence of God is so present in one person's life that we can't tell the

song from the singer.

And in this particular person, the fullness of God is fully present.

And so when Jesus is transfigured, the disciples have this kind of experience.

Williams goes on to say that it's no wonder that the disciples are sprawling helplessly.

To see them merit the bottom of the icon, they're just kind of flattened by this experience.

He says they face a tidal wave.

This tidal wave is nothing less than the pure love of God and it can be overwhelming.

I wonder if you've ever had a moment in your life where you knew and felt that you were perfectly loved.

I wonder if you've ever had a moment where you knew that you were perfectly forgiven.

And I wonder if you've ever had a moment where you knew that you were perfectly accepted

for who and for what you are, absolutely and completely.

I hope that you have, and if you've had that kind of experience, you know that it is powerful.

It's like a tidal wave.

It is overwhelming.

You tend to have an emotional response to that kind of experience.

But I also want to let you know that if you haven't had that experience, you're still

loved and forgiven and accepted.

Even and especially when you may not feel that you are, even and especially in moments

of challenge and trial, even and especially when it seems that God is silent.

His voice comes from heaven and it says, this is my son, the beloved, listen to him.

But in this moment, Jesus says nothing.

And so it becomes this lesson about the Christian life, maybe becoming one of listening, listening

for God, listening for the voice of Jesus, listening to others.

Like music, sometimes we hear the notes of God's love and care.

Sometimes thankfully and blessedly we hear God's love through the people around us, through

their prayers and support.

Sometimes thankfully and blessedly we hear God's love through the beauty of the creation

around us.

Sometimes I hope that we hear the love of God in church.

And yes, sometimes we don't seem to hear much of anything.

About 20 years ago I got to hear this guy, Jeremy Begby is a theologian and a pianist,

a musician and a love what he says about silence.

He says, you know, silence is the thing that actually gives music meaning and life.

Without the silence between the notes, the music would be cacophonous and unpleasant to

listen to.

The silences of music he says are not empty silences, they're full because it's a silence in which

you can anticipate what's coming next.

You're waiting for the base to drop, you're waiting for the next notes.

It's not a silence that is without hope in other words, without expectation, it's a silence that gives the rest of the music its meaning. And so he teaches us that this is a great metaphor for learning to wait on God when there doesn't seem to be any music around. And God doesn't seem to be doing anything. Music can remind us that when nothing seems to be happening, he says, God is still at work. God's promises still stand. The music of God's song in our lives goes on. And we're waiting for the final resolution of the music to come. And it always will come. But it can often feel like we're in the middle of it. We can often feel like we're in the middle of those silences. And so when we look to the transfiguration to the presence of God, so richly dwelling in Jesus, we realize that we have a very limited perspective. Sometimes you just hear a note here and a note there. A limited view of whatever music God is making in our lives. Jesus knew this silence, even the silence of God while he was on the cross. It's not seen at that point that God's love was going to shine through and that the music would continue. It seemed only like silence, with no more music to come. And so I think the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus are meant to teach us ultimately that God can live in the middle of death, that even the ultimate form of silence, death, the seeming end to all the music of our lives is not without the presence of God. The transfiguration shows us that we are in God. We are in the presence of God even when it may not seem like it. The disciples go back to seeing Jesus as their friend and teacher after the transfiguration. He wasn't glowing with light anymore. He wasn't manifesting this presence in the same way. And yet they must have known something of the enduring presence of the Holy with Jesus. They must have known something of the music of his life that was never separated from God's music. The transfiguration shows us that God is not going anywhere. God wants us to see the Holy and to know the Holy. God wants our lives to be full of God's presence and God wants us to know that even in the silences of our lives, the seeming failures, the moments of confusion, the times of pain, the moments in which God is still speaking, still singing, still

making music.

One of the most meaningful things for me, and maybe one of the reasons I became a priest,

was that the Holy Eucharist is a powerful reminder of this, that God is always speaking

God's music, even in the presence of silence.

I've seen it in my own life and in the lives of other people.

It's a constant reminder of the constancy of God's love, even in the face of our own

inconstancy.

When I don't show up to church with my whole self, in fact, I often show up broken.

God is still here.

When I'm not hearing the familiar notes of God's music in my life, when I hear nothing

but silence, God is still here.

When I am racked by confusion or pain or self doubt, God is still here.

This piece right here is called a veil.

So in a few moments, when we prepare the table for Holy Communion, we are unveiling or

revealing something that we believe to be deeply true about God, that even in the silence

God shows up.

God promises to give God's very self, the body and the blood to us, no matter how we feel,

no matter what we're going through.

God speaks here and God says, this is my body, broken for you.

This is my blood shed for you.

Take it and remember that I love you always, that my song goes on.