

THE NEEDS OF OUR SOULS

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Reading:

The human soul is hungry for beauty; we seek it everywhere — in landscape, music, art, clothes, furniture, gardening, companionship, love, religion and in ourselves... When we experience the beautiful, there is a sense of homecoming. We feel most alive in the presence of the beautiful, for it meets the needs of our souls. For a while, the strains of struggle and endurance are relieved, and our frailty is illuminated by a different light... In the experience of beauty, we awaken and surrender in the same act. Beauty brings a sense of completion and sureness. Without any of the usual calculation, we can slip into the beautiful with the same ease as we slip into the seamless embrace of water; something ancient within us already trusts that this embrace will hold us.

— John O'Donohue, *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*

Sermon:

Today, we have publicly welcomed 53 new members into the extended family of All Souls. This is indeed a joyous occasion for those of us who are already here, because these newly-formed commitments will serve to infuse new vitality into our congregation. This is also a good time to ask why any of us are here. After all, there are lots of things to do on a weekend morning in the capital of the world. Why go to church?

In our reading for the morning, the late Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue speaks of the needs of our souls — the ceaseless strains of struggle, the relentless pressure to endure, and the inescapable awareness of our frailty. What we need, Donahue says, is to find our way home — home to a place where the strains of struggle can be relieved and our frailty can be illuminated by a different light. In this experience of homecoming, he says, we feel ourselves held in the comforting arms of an ancient embrace.

Donahue describes this healing embrace as the experience of beauty. I would go one step further and say that experiences of beauty, especially in their spiritual form, invite us to put things into perspective — to map the relationships between us and

everything else. They enable us to see where we fit in. In so doing, they illuminate both life's tragedy and its possibility.

In spiritual terms, music can provide us with compelling, and even transformative, experiences of beauty. Some time ago, Holly and I went to Carnegie Hall to hear the Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Orchestra under the direction of James Levine. Among other works, they performed Mozart's *Mass in C Minor*, which was written three years after Mozart's *Mass in C Major*, three movements of which we have heard magnificently performed this morning by Alejandro and the choir. All told, Mozart wrote 17 masses during his lifetime. Perhaps he returned to this musical form again and again because it met the needs of his soul, helping him make sense of a world filled with struggle and frailty.

Mozart's *Mass in C Minor*, viewed by many as his grandest sacred work, amply illustrates the interplay of tragedy and possibility. While Mozart wrote most of his music either on commission or for his own use as a performer, he composed the *Mass in C Minor* to fulfill a promise he made to his wife, Constanze Weber, before their marriage. Constanze herself stated that the Mass was composed "in consequence of a vow that he had made to do so, on her safe recovery after the birth of their first child — relative to which he had been particularly anxious."

Mozart evidently began work on the Mass shortly after Constanze became pregnant. Their first son, Raimund, was born in June of 1783. The infant died two months later. Although Mozart never completed the *Mass in C Minor*, a performance of the sections he had finished took place in Salzburg later that fall, with Constanze singing the soprano solo part. Given the circumstances, her initial solo in the Mass could not have been more appropriately designated by Mozart. It appears in the *Kyrie*, the very first section of the Mass, when the soprano sings "*Christe eleison*," which is Greek for "Christ, have mercy upon us."

As I sat in Carnegie Hall listening to Heidi Grant Murphy sing the part originally written for Constanze Weber, it struck me as odd that more than two centuries later our most gifted musicians still gather in our most celebrated concert halls to sing masses, which are musical versions of the Catholic Communion service. The Met Chorus arguably serves as the cathedral choir for one of the world's most secular cities, and here they were singing about something many people don't believe in.

The Met isn't unusual in this respect, of course. Many serious choirs, including our choir, still perform masses regularly. And many serious composers have composed them over the centuries, and some still do even today. You must admit that it's something of a puzzle.

Subtleties aside, the texts of these masses are all roughly the same; the composers follow the form of the ordinary Catholic communion service. In Mozart's case, the service included the *Kyrie* (the text translates as Lord, have mercy upon us), and the *Gloria* (Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all those of good will), and the *Credo* (I believe in one God, and so on), and the *Sanctus* (Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of

Hosts). Many masses also include the *Agnus Dei* (The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.) or the *Benedictus* (Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord) or both.

Given that a Mass is essentially Holy Communion without bread and wine, one would expect to hear such words on, say, Sunday morning at St. Patrick's Cathedral, but not on Friday night at Carnegie Hall. In fact, I would wager that almost none of the people listening to Mozart's Mass in Carnegie Hall would pay that kind of money to attend Communion. They — and we — are after another kind of experience entirely. We seek to meet the needs of our souls in a different way.

In his book *The Art of Travel*, the essayist Alain Botton sets out to discover how we can experience emotions that will benefit our souls. He wants to find a way to put things in perspective. He notes that Wordsworth urged us to travel through beautiful landscapes in order to feel these beneficial emotions. Botton, whom I would describe as a wistful atheist, sets his sights on the experience of the sublime, which he describes as the feeling of awe — a pleasurable experience of beauty that leaves us feeling small and insignificant.

For his part, Botton discovered the sublime in the Sinai Desert. Standing in a valley created four hundred million years ago beside a granite mountain more than a mile high, Botton observes that human beings by comparison seem merely dust postponed. But even when we are not in a desert, he goes on to say, “the behavior of others and our own flaws are prone to leave us feeling small.” He says, “Sublime places repeat in grand terms a lesson that ordinary life typically introduces viciously: that the universe is mightier than we are, that we are frail and temporary and have no alternative but to accept limitations on our will; that we must bow to necessities greater than ourselves.”

The perspective Botton achieved in the desert mirrors the perspective Mozart achieves in his *Mass in C Minor*. Its power comes not only from the beauty of the music, but also from the religious interplay of awe and obligation it evokes. Like walking in the desert or gazing into the mysteries of the night sky, the Mass invites us to put things in perspective. When we look at the grand sweep of life, we understand that the principle themes of the Mass — *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo* and *Sanctus* — point toward experiences of awe and obligation that are universal. Mozart's work describes these experiences using Christian language, but the emotional trajectory of the Mass extends far beyond the Christian faith. As spiritual seekers today, we listen to the Mass because it meets the needs of our souls, even if we happen not to be Christian.

The Mass begins where we often begin in life, with *Kyrie*, which is a cry for mercy or pity. Each of us inevitably encounters times when we are overwhelmed. Life can be difficult, even painful, as Wolfgang and Constanze found out the hard way. Sometimes people we love die — our children or parents or spouses or lovers. Sometimes we or those we care about fall ill or lose jobs. Sometimes we lose our way in life, betraying our best intentions and disappointing people who depend on us. No matter how fortunate

and healthy and well-connected and well-heeled a person may be, nothing can insulate anyone from the harsh realities of life. Sometimes, when life is tough, the only way we can respond is to plead for mercy.

Alain Botton puts it this way in his reflection on the desert: “The vast spaces of nature provide us with the finest, the most respectful reminder of all that exceeds us. If we spend time in them, they may help us to accept more graciously the great, unfathomable events that molest our lives and will inevitably return us to dust.”

Not everything in life leads us to cry for help, however, which is why the Mass then moves to *Gloria*, which means praise. This movement of music and spirit expresses a feeling of awe at the beauty of what we see and hear and feel. We respond almost spontaneously with a word of praise. I say, praise Mozart and Palestrina and Etta James and Beth Hart. Praise the planet Saturn and its rings and the night sky. Praise the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop. Praise things born of earth: chanterelle mushrooms and irises. Praise pure water and fresh air. Praise my fierce love for my wife and my daughter. Praise that they love me back.

The Mass then asks us to respond as it moves to *Credo*, which means I believe. The Latin word *credo* usually appears in our language as the word *creed*, such as the Apostles Creed used by most Christians in their worship. But one possible derivation of the Latin word *credo* combines two other Latin words, *cor*, meaning heart, and *do*, from the verb meaning to give. On these terms, *cor-do* originally meant “I give my heart.” To believe in something is to give your heart to it.

In my view, a *credo* is not primarily about whether you believe the Bible is true or God is spirit. It is about what you aspire to give your heart to. A *credo* is a commitment that guides our conduct. Because our commitments emerge from the depths of our hearts, they define who we are — not by specifying our beliefs, but by revealing the choices we have made about how we intend to live. These choices emerge in response to our feelings of humility and awe in the face of the beauty and grandeur of life. These feelings become religious when they are accompanied by a sense of duty to the larger life that we share.

And then the music invites us to experience the world and our place in it as *Sanctus*, which means holy. We feel reverence for what Botton calls “necessities greater than ourselves.” He reminds us of the story in the Hebrew Bible about a man named Job, who was wealthy and blessed until suddenly all manner of bad things began happening to him. Job asks God why he has been made to suffer although he has been good. God replies, “Do not be surprised that things have not gone your way: the universe is greater than you...See how small you are next to the mountains. Accept what is bigger than you and what you do not understand.”

And thus the beauty of the Mass puts our lives and our world into perspective. It highlights the most important moments of human experience. *Kyrie*: a cry for mercy. *Gloria*: a word of praise. *Credo*: I give my heart. *Sanctus*: I dwell in holiness. You and I may come alive to these experiences by listening to Mozart, or we may discover them by

looking into the night sky, or by walking in the desert. There are many other ways as well to find times and places where the beauty of life amazes us, and humbles us, perhaps even brings us to our knees. As O'Donohue puts it, "we awaken and surrender in the same act." And we respond with a plea for mercy, or a word of praise, or recognition of our duty, or a holy silence.

Why go to church? We gather in this sanctuary each week to put our lives and our world in perspective – to acknowledge the tragedy of life and to be enlivened by its possibilities. In so doing, we find a place for ourselves — a home for our common humanity. Together, we feel ourselves being held in the comforting arms of an ancient embrace.