

Jazz and Blues Theology

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.

March 6, 2011 Peace United Church of Christ

For the last 7 years or so, I have been celebrating Jazz Sunday on this last Sunday in the Mardi Gras season. A few years ago, I got to know a pianist from Charlotte who plays at the Cajun Queen Restaurant. Well he would come to worship and bring with him a drummer, another person on clarinet, and some years a trombone player as well.

To say the least, it was a smash hit. Normally our attendance in Newton ran about 80, but on Jazz Sunday it ran about 180.

Be that as it may, not everyone in Hickory was in love with the idea of playing jazz and blues in worship. I know this because I got an anonymous letter last year. So, believing as I do that you should never let anonymous mail go to waste, I thought I'd share the letter with you today.

Dear Mr. Luck,

I have been in shock ever since I read in the paper about your service on Sunday – Jazz Sunday. Do you not realize how your church is becoming like the world.... The times we are living in is very serious times. We can't afford to take even one Sunday without hearing the Word of God. I pray that your church is not just "Seeker Friendly" and interested only in pleasing the flesh. You as a pastor must know that God will hold you accountable.... The literal word needs to be taught each Sunday with no "Jazz Sunday." What would visitors think of your church? This disturbs me as a child of God to know that this is being done. Please pray about this before you allow this to continue.

Sincerely, Barbara

Well being the classy and mature woman she is, Barbara chose neither to leave her last name or her address. Too bad. I could have sent her a copy of this sermon. But looking beyond her self-righteousness & arrogance, there is an assumption grounding her argument that I want to explore this morning. In short she believes that the musical genres of jazz and blues have nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ & therefore nothing to do with the church's worship of the Almighty. She could not be more wrong.

So what does jazz and the blues have to do with the gospel? I'm glad you asked. First, they are both experiential phenomena, which is to say both jazz and the gospel are learned by doing and not simply by studying. It's amazing how many Jazz musicians can't read a lick of music, but it's never bothered them because they learned to play by watching and imitating and by playing with others. As I tried to articulate on my first Sunday with you, at its best, I believe it's the same with our faith. Jesus did not say, here's the catechism, go study and then catch up to me and I'll give you an EOG; and if you get a 3 or 4 and prove yourself then I'll use you. Instead Jesus said to those first disciples, "Come and see; follow me and we'll learn how to do it while we're doing it."

We live and we learn and we believe on the fly; it's called improv. Actually it's called faith. So Barbara, when it comes to living our faith, jazz and the blues have a lot to teach us about maintaining structure & integrity even while we wing it. Which leads me to my next point.

Second, both jazz and the gospel believe music shouldn't and perhaps even can't be made alone. We live in a world where everyone is encouraged to do their own thing. The problem with doing your own thing is that in the process, there's a lot of noise, AND some musicians get drowned out while others hog the spotlight. The same thing can happen in church. For every diva hogging the spotlight or a position at church, there are 3 or 4 others who haven't had a chance to play. The nice thing about jazz is that they've learned to take turns. Everybody gets a chance to do their thing AND everybody gets a chance to be in the background

and support those who have the spotlight. The Apostle Paul talks about the body of Christ, with each member having a specific & unique function, but a function that benefits all. If that's not a metaphor for jazz, I don't know what is. Likewise jazz is a metaphor for the church or at least a church at its best; we make music by letting everybody participate.

Third, both jazz and the church came into being to give voice to, to address and to relieve the deep needs of suffering people. In short, and I hate to break this to Barbara, the people who Jesus hung out with are the kind of people who would've listened to jazz & blues.

Where did jazz start? The beginnings of jazz are found in the work songs & field hollers that slaves utilized to help them endure their arduous labor. Eventually church harmonies were adapted to African melodies and to the call and response choruses of the fields. And jazz evolved from there.

So why isn't jazz used more in churches? Well, it's hard using a genre born out of oppression when everybody is singing praise music. I'll be honest: most contemporary Christian music has no appeal for me whatsoever. And it has nothing to do with the fact that it's contemporary. It has to do with the fact that most of it is inane. Singing "Jesus is Your name" a few hundred times doesn't do it for me. I'm pretty sure the Dude already knows his name.

But let me put this another way. One of my friends was asked to go to a contemporary worship service. He replied by saying, "I'll go when you start singing laments." It's interesting; if you listen to the music of Bruce Springsteen you'll hear laments. The same can be said with U2. Even the music of rappers like Kanye West and K'naan are replete with laments. Contemporary Christian music however is not, which is ironic, considering the Bible is full of laments.

By the waters, the waters of Babylon.

We lay down and wept, and wept for thee Zion.

We remember thee, remember thee, remember thee Zion.

We need jazz and the blues in worship. In our ease and prosperity in the west, we in the church have forgotten how to weep for others. And we most certainly have forgotten how to be angry in the face of injustice. But neither the scriptures nor the spirituals nor the blues nor jazz have ever forgotten how to weep or how to be angry. And here again is irony, because the music that is the most in touch with pain, can be incredibly joyful. It is a joy that emerges from telling it like it is; it is a joy that sees all of life in its totality. It sings that things aren't right AND at the same time affirms that God's not done with us.

This leads me to another problem I have with so much of Christian & church music: We in the church constantly want to draw a line separating so-called secular and so-called sacred music. Let's look at Bruce Springsteen for a minute. I assume most people would say he's a secular artist. And yet what does he sing about? Redemption, sin, suffering, transformation, hope; these are the themes constantly running through his music. One of his songs starts off... "Paul and Silas bound in jail, had no money for their bail; keep your eyes on the prize, hold on." So this so-called secular artist sings of a story found Acts 16. In another song, Bruce explores the story of Jesus' life from his mother's Mary's perspective. At his concert in Madison Square Garden, Bruce sang "Wash me in the waters." A secular artist? Really?

But while the church has tried to divorce itself of that which is "secular", jazz and blues have never tried to divorce themselves of the holy. Ellington, Brubeck, Coltraine of High Point, NC and on and on; they all have explored their faith in their music. So what if they explored their faith on Saturday night and not on Sunday morning? And in their Saturday night music, they, like the psalms of the Bible, contemplated both the joys and the sorrows, the injustices and the beauty. Through the sounds of music, they sought how to make something meaningful out of the noises of life.

Going back to Barbara, she speaks of jazz as that which pleases the flesh. On this one issue, I completely agree. It absolutely pleases the flesh, and when those rhythms get going its hard even for white

people to sit still. The difference is that it bothers Barbara, not me. I believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, in the flesh. He was real. And when he walked amongst us, he talked about that which was tangible and real: the lilies of the field, farms, crops, fish, food. He made wine – a lot of it. He drank wine and ultimately he was condemned by religious conservatives for partying and eating with prostitutes and sinners, even as Barbara condemned me for playing the music of prostitutes and sinners. Unlike Barbara, I can easily see Jesus enjoying a hurricane while listening to a jazz group in a smoke-filled hall.

Have any of you ever been to Preservation Hall in New Orleans? Dirt floor, benches, smoke and all manner of people including the poor; it is exactly the kind of place where Jesus would have felt utterly at home. It ain't glorious, but it's real which is exactly why it's glorious.

Unfortunately, too often the church has chosen the glory of the mountaintop over the joys and struggles of the valley. In today's gospel lesson, Peter wants to stay on the mountaintop. He likes the glory and the light show and the who's who crowd. Can you blame him or for wanting to hang out with Moses and Elijah. I mean this is like winning the lottery for a good Jewish boy. But Peter doesn't get to stay up on the mountain. He can glimpse it, yes; but he cannot stay there. And so Jesus leads them down the mountain and he tells them not to even talk about what they saw.

"Well Jesus if we can't put it on TV and we can't tweet about it, what good was it." The disciples are probably still trying to figure out what's going on when they get down in the valley. And when they arrive, they find a child who had a demon in her.

Folks, if we in the church stay up on the mountain like Barbara, if we stay in our religious ghettos singing praise music we will never see, never hear and never know of the children with demons.

But the jazz and the blues and a lot of secular artists are not afraid to go down into the valley. These artists know about wrestling with demons. St. John Coltrane knew about demons. These artists know about floods and winds and what happens to the people who don't live in high places. And that is why they sing laments.

It's ironic is it not? I think so-called secular artists are more comfortable with the cross than we are.

In the valley with real hurting people, NOT the mountaintop, is where our Lord walked and lived. Yeah he spent some time on the mountain, but very little. Even as I said last week, the Galilee valley is the lowest place on earth with fresh water. But the valley is where he calls us to be.

So once again;

- 1) jazz and the gospel are experiential;
- 2) jazz and the gospel make music by making room for others;
- 3) jazz and the gospel believe in giving voice to the people suffering in the valley.

Barbara, like Peter, sees glory on the mountaintops; the joy of being above the secular world. But we know that our Lord sees glory in the valley & on the cross. And that is exactly where we're going, especially in this upcoming Lenten season. So thanks be to God for the One who goes to Jerusalem and thanks be to God for jazz.

Amen.