

**The Glory of God and Refreshment of the Soul:
J.S. Bach's Aim and End of Music
November 1, 2009**

Yesterday, as I prepared to write this sermon, a friend of mine asked me, "Why are you doing a service on Bach?" I scrambled to find a justifiable answer. First arose in my mind, however, the reasons I'm *not* speaking about Bach today. It's not because it's his birthday. That's not until March. It's not because he was a Unitarian or a Universalist or a Unitarian Universalist. He was, as would be fairly common for people living in late 17th and early 18th century Germany, a devout Lutheran. It's not because I myself am knowledgeable about music, and thus able to explore the religious significance of Bach's fugues, cantatas, toccatas and everything Baroque; most weeks I have to email Elke and Gay Patterson to ask them if the hymns I've chosen for their lyrics look at all musically manageable.

So, putting those reasons aside, I considered the reasons for doing a Bach-centered service which might find validation here at Wildflower Church. For instance, perhaps it is because I, like any good Wildflower, appreciate a good pun. For, when Ludwig von Beethoven spoke of Bach, he was known to say that the earlier composer was “nicht Bach, sondern Meer.” Get it? It’s a good one, right? Nicht Bach, sondern Meer? You see, in German, the word *Bach* means *stream*, or *little river*. What Beethoven was saying was, “nicht Bach—not a stream—sondern Meer—but a sea.”

Beyond the puns though, and yes, especially beyond the pun that Steve Brooks and I both came up with independently of each other—that today we fall *Bach* an hour—there are other reasons to consider honoring the composer. If there is *any* way in which I might feel a kindred spirit to Bach, it is in our respective services to religious institutions. Though for

much of his earlier career, Bach wandered from town to town, and employer to employer, he eventually settled at St. Thomas Church, in Leipzig, where he served as the cantor, or choir director, and musical director. His days filled with teaching as well as with composing, Bach was known to write a new cantata *every* week. That's like us asking Elke to supply us with an hour's worth of newly composed songs for the choir for every Sunday. I myself couldn't imagine such a task. It's one thing to put words to paper and offer up a sermon in which I hope there will be at least one redeeming message on Sunday mornings. To write in the language of music, to deliver a message in not one voice, but a whole choir of voices, along with one's own ten fingers and two feet—what a feat indeed! Bach's weekly compositions humble me to the simplicity of the work I am called to do.

And yet while I am humbled, I am also raised, lifted up. For while musical composition was the gift Johann Sebastian Bach was given, writing is mine, and it is in my work as a minister that I feel I am able to put my writing to its best use. So I feel a connection with the composer, putting my creative energy, as did he, into the work of the church.

Not that I am equating the measure of my gift with Bach's. Nor do I mean to use the word *gift* itself as if to emphasize that *I*, this ego, am really good at something, don't you agree? No, I mean, someone, something has *given* me, offered me, the *gift* of writing. Am I supposed to refuse such a gift? Or am I going to graciously accept and make use of it? Think of the gifts you have been given. You know what they are: cooking, carpentry, embroidery; song writing, car tinkering, quilting; drumming, computers, weaving. To be given such gifts means not that you necessarily have to create

the very best thing for the rest of the world, and have your name remembered for it, although if that happens that's wonderful. But maybe, first and foremost, the gift is there for *you*, for you to find meaning and expression and creativity in your own life. Might that not be enough? Remember, aside from "the glory of God," Bach said that the aim and end of all music is the "refreshment of the soul." The same might be said for any creative endeavor, and we could all use a little bit of refreshing of the soul, no matter what creative gift we've been given to endeavor with.

But speaking of the Glory of God, since that *is* the first thing Bach holds up when talking about the aim of music, and we *are* focusing on Bach today, how might we make meaning of, or translate, such a notion for our own lives? For some, actually, little translation is needed at all: God is Love, therefore the aim of music is to glorify, or exalt, the experience

of Love. For some, God is, to quote that first source from which our living Unitarian Universalist tradition draws, God is that “transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.” Music, and other creative expressions, helps us celebrate that transcending mystery and wonder.

For the pagans among us, to express our creative gifts perhaps is to experience and affirm the Mystery that, “if that which you seek, you will not find within yourself, you will never find it without.” Applying that pagan notion back into Christian terms more familiar to Bach and perhaps a few of us, one might say simply, “the kingdom of God [or Goddess] is within.” “If that which you seek, you will not find within yourself, you will never find it without.” “The kingdom of God is within.” Hear the similarities?

Taking things still a step further, or closer, thinking of both the pagan and the Christian ideas of such awesome power and beauty living within each of us, I am reminded of the words of one of our own Universalist ancestors, John Murray, who said, “you may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women.” In other words, use your creative powers for the common good.

Now here, it may seem like I am contradicting myself. On the one hand, I am encouraging you all to see that using your gifts for the refreshment of your own souls is enough. On the other, I’m quoting a prophet who says that whatever creative light you hold, don’t hide it, but let it spill out into the lives of others for their betterment as well. Well, which is it, Eliza? Maybe this is where Bach’s love of counterpoint—that dance between two hands, two songs—comes in. Some of you have

heard me tell this story before, but I'll tell it again: When I was in seminary, there was a class I took called Arts of Ministry, where we studied everything that goes on in the work of a church and in the work of its minister. One thing that my fellow students and I would bring up to our curmudgeonly wise professor was, "How do you get a congregation to grow?" In other words, how do you lure people into the church? My professor remarked simply one day, "it shouldn't be about growth; it should be about excellence. With excellence will come growth."

Do you hear the counterpoint here? At one's core, at one's foundation, one must focus on the gifts one has been given. But subsequently, as a result of nourishing one's own gifts, others will receive that gift as well. The two—excellence and growth—will begin to dance together.

Now, applying that idea to Bach, remember his own words, quoted by Albert Schweitzer: “Figured bass,’ [Bach] says... “is the most perfect foundation of music. It is executed with both hands in such a manner that the left hand plays the notes that are written, while the right adds consonances and dissonances thereto, making an agreeable harmony for the Glory of God and the justifiable gratification of the soul.” In other words, on the one hand, literally and metaphorically, you must begin with the notes, or the gifts, you’ve been given. On the other hand, also literally and metaphorically, to the call of those notes or gifts shall begin a response of other, harmonizing notes or gifts. And out of *that* combination is made manifest both exaltation and rejuvenation.

Now, when Johann Sebastian Bach was a small child, busily copying music by hand for his father and, after his father died, for his older brother, or when as a child still he

was sent climbing deep inside church organs to assist his older brother and others in repairing various bellows and stops, it's doubtful Bach was quite this intentional about making counterpoint such a spiritual practice in his life. Nor did he assume that all his dedication to his music and to his religion would bring him to a posthumous fame that would lead, among other things, to a gifted young pianist in a small Unitarian Universalist church in Austin, Texas, in the United States of America, playing his music in a service some 260 years after his death. As Albert Schweitzer notes, Bach "made no effort to win recognition for his greatest works, and did not summon the world to make acquaintance with them." In fact, late in his career, and for decades after his death, Bach's achievements went largely unappreciated by others. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig von Beethoven were among the few composers to come after him who initially appreciated all

that Bach had achieved. Beethoven not only cleverly remarked, “nicht Bach, sondern Meer,” but also referred to Bach as “Urvater der Harmonie”—the original father of harmony. Beethoven, the kind of rebel composer that Schweitzer would categorize along with Wagner as a “subjective artist... independent of the epoch in which” he lived, Beethoven was humbly acknowledging that Bach, though perhaps an objective kind of artist who worked “only within the forms and ideas of [his] time,” created something larger than the sum of his endeavors—a harmonious dance of God and the soul.

Even with Beethoven’s praises, though, it wasn’t until 1829, when Felix Mendelssohn performed Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion* in Berlin, that people truly began to pay attention to the work of this composer who had now been dead for decades. Did that delayed appreciation matter to Bach? No.

What mattered was that he composed the music that he was called to write, and that he put it to the best use possible while he was on this Earth.

Does it matter to *us* that Bach's music survives? If we can be but grateful recipients of a particular kind of light that one man did not hide; if we can see how his light spilled onto others who came after him, who in turn, inspired by him, shed their light as well; if we can step into the music and join in the dance of counterpoint, living our own gifts and receiving each other's, then, with the rivers clapping their hands, and mountains signing in chorus, and a new song being sung to the Eternal, my hunch is that the answer is yes. Yes, and amen.

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