

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Isaiah 50:4-10

James 3:1-12

Mark 9:14-29

The silence between the notes is part of the music. Your ear hears the silence. The composer crafts the music, the notes and the silence, to enhance the drama, to enhance the beauty of what you experience. Beethoven's 5th Symphony captures one's heart immediately. The silence between the notes is part of the composition. Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, written to commemorate Napoleon's retreat from Moscow, is a sublime piece of music that is enriched by the silent anticipation of the next dramatic movement. In Japanese art, empty or negative space is called "ma." The use of "ma" in Japanese art is considered as essential as what the artist is attempting to depict. My daughter-in-law competed in calligraphy tournaments as a youth, painting Chinese characters within preconfigured borders. Every stroke had to be precise. The intentional use of empty space was critical for her to achieve something beautiful.

This morning our eyes, our ears are on one of the most compelling believers in the NT. He is magnificent and we don't even know his name. It is St. Mark's intention that you see yourself in this man. He is under duress. He is a father and his son is suffering. For years, this young lad has suffered, being tormented by an unclean spirit, a demonic spirit. Imagine watching your son endure a merciless affliction and being powerless to render aid. It wants to destroy him. The evil spirit casts the son into fire and water in an attempt to take his life. The lad's father sees this and pursues a genuine solution, searching out for the Teacher, the Rabbi, the One who delivers the afflicted from their darkness. Jesus is returning from the Mt. of Transfiguration. He had just revealed His glory to Peter, James, and John. God the Father's voice was heard on the Mountain. "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:7).

Relief; that's what the boy's father felt as Jesus approached. The Lord's disciples had proven to be ineffectual. Now the object of the father's hope was on the scene. The Lord Christ and the lad's father have a brief discourse regarding the boy's condition. The climax of the episode is building. Jesus asks for the boy to be brought to Him. As soon as the unclean spirit saw the Lord it convulsed the boy. Again, there is a brief conversation between the boy's father and the Lord Christ but the beleaguered man is eager to cut to the chase. His need is great. He prays to the Incarnate God who stands mere feet from him, mere feet or less from his tormented son. It is, however, a tepid prayer. It is overly cautious, tentative, a prayer that hedges, a prayer that limits the One to whom He prays, the One who stands on the earth to save humanity from sin and death. "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (Mark 9:22). Jesus seizes on the mindset that lies beneath the words. If you can?! Where is this man's hope? What principles rule his heart? What is the nature of your hope? What principles rule your heart? Disappointment; are you familiar with disappointment? Does your familiarity with disappointment temper the strength of your faith? Or are you unlike every other believer on the planet and do you have zero doubt in your life? Like me, you have a sinful nature. None of you perpetually believe in the most complete and deepest sense. Do you know this? About yourself, do you know this?

It is a mercy that Jesus speaks. It is a hard word to hear but it is merciful. It prompts faith to stretch, it prompts awareness of our limits, our worldly vision, our unbelief. “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes” (Mark 9:23). And now comes the silence, a stop action moment of great depth, great movement, great import. I don’t know how long it took for the man to reply but I know something happened in between Jesus’ words hitting his ears, his soul, and his reply. St. Mark says that the father of the child *immediately* cried out his response, but you and I know how slow time sometimes moves, how fast our brains work. That empty space between Jesus offering His stern encouragement and the man’s sublime response – what happened in that silence, that priceless void of sound? The man’s faith was rattled, shaken by the force of Christ’s words, shaken by self-reflection and self-awareness and repentance. Faith was awakened to full bloom. Trust pulsed, beautifully aroused within a man who now saw deeper than the superficial things of this world. Within that silent period between Jesus’ reminder of His authority and the man’s confession the man was changed, inspired by the Holy Spirit, alive with the glory of Immanuel, God with us. What came out of his mouth is proof of what happened in the silence. “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

It was an absolute surrender. Transparent, guileless – that is what the man was; that is what I want to be. You have had those silent moments where God’s word strips away the façade, the vain trappings of all your fear, your doubt. You have had those silent moments where your worldly outlook and your faith are measured, side by side, and you know how you have chosen poorly. You have had those silent moments where God grace overwhelms your poor choices, where His love swamps your partial devotion, where His light casts out the darkness of unbelief. Those silent moments are part of the music. Those silent moments are divine art in your soul – God revealing Himself to you as true and reliable and present. God was at work in whatever time there was between Jesus saying: “All things are possible for one who believes” and the self-aware father crying out: “I believe; help my unbelief!” The Word does not return empty. That’s God’s work. The Word accomplishes the purposes for which it was sent. That’s God’s work. “The Word is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). That Word is alive here, among us, in this age of Christendom.

Do you know what they yelled at Jesus as He hung on the cross? It was a word of ridicule, spite, and rank blindness. They yelled, “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him” (Matthew 27:43). The mockery plays off a psalm verse, Psalm 22. “He trusts in the Lord; let him deliver him; let him rescue him, for he delights in him!” (Psalm 22:8). Was there silence in the Savior’s spirit as He heard those words? His tormentors meant them for evil. In His silent pain, Jesus embraced the good words of Psalm 22 perfectly. Isaiah spoke of the event prophetically. “I gave my back to those who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame” (Isaiah 50:6-7). Unwavering; the Lord Christ’s allegiance to you is unwavering. He trusted His Father. He obliterated the kingdom of darkness. He crushed the serpent’s head. He liberates those in the clutches of death. In the silence of His pain, Jesus is steadfast, strong, resilient, and true. In the silence of His pain, Jesus knew “He who vindicates me is near” (Isaiah 50:8). Christ crucified is our music. The Incarnation, the Word made flesh is the art that is your soul.

Jesus' death and resurrection is the reason why we have a Bible. The Son of God dying for sins and rising again for our justification is the reason why there is a church. God with us is why we have Christian schools. Our school is thoroughly devoted to ministry to children, thoroughly devoted to teaching little ones the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. What is holy, what is eternally true, what is honorable and just and lovely and pure and commendable and worthy of praise – that is what animates our school, our life of faith, the life of Christ the King Lutheran Church. God is at work here. The Lord Christ is present and at work to bless all who hear His Word. Jesus cast out the unclean spirit from the boy. St. Mark is keen to tell us that the boy became like a corpse and that Jesus lifted him up. Death and resurrection is written all over this episode. Death and resurrection, our eternal redemption, is written all over you, all over this congregation, all over our school. The forgiveness that comes from Jesus' sacrifice on the holy cross and His mighty resurrection from the dead is the music of our church and school. May our trust, our hope, our love bloom and grow that our Lord be glorified and our lives be fruitful and pleasing to our Father.