

Mark 12:28-34

word count: 1,736

When the von Trapp family refused to fly the Nazi flag over the Villa Trapp in Austria, they knew their time there was short. When they would not sing at Hitler's birthday party in 1938, they fled to Italy, and then engaged on a singing tour to America, which led to their settling into a new life in Stowe, Vermont. The family decided what was important, choosing their family and their sense of integrity over the comfortable lifestyle of their Salzburg villa, filled with beautiful things.

The musical loosely based on their life story is called, "The Sound of Music." Unlike the character played by Christopher Plumer, Baron von Trapp was a gentle man who loved music, and taught his children to sing before Maria entered the picture. The family devoted itself to making both sacred and secular music, and following the message of charity taught by their church. They sang for money, as the worldwide depression had robbed them of wealth, and they assisted the poor around them, while taking in lodgers to pay the bills.

After they fled, both Himmler and the US army occupied the Villa Trapp. My uncle was one of the soldiers stationed in their home. At the end of their occupation, the troops were told to take away everything that could be turned into cash by the Nazis. My uncle took two small reproductions of paintings, one of Jane Seymour and the other of Anne Boleyn. After the war, he wrote to the family, describing the pieces. A representative eventually got back to him, and indicated that the family was not interested.

The von Trapp family made music, and woven into the integrity you hear in their harmony was the ethic they practiced that allowed them to leave behind so much of glistening value in exchange for what really mattered.

What is the music that you make? How does it move you to act in harmony with all that you believe to be sacred?

I stood in my uncle's apartment in Sarasota last week and stared at these two small paintings. Then I carefully took them off the wall, wrapped them in bubble wrap, and put them in my suitcase. My uncle passed away shortly after his big 90th birthday bash, and I got the call while I was on vacation that I would have to come down and take care of things.

After the details are finished and the memorial service has ended, what is left of one's life? I walked through this apartment in his retirement home community and wondered where to begin. I sprayed my aunt's Chanel into the air and walked into it just to recall her sense of elegance and style. I sat at my uncle's desk and began to pour through his papers.

Ted Tellstrom was a figure in music education into the early 80's. He conducted school choruses, taught music, and was the Director of Music and Art for all state education programs in New York. His textbook, "Music in American Education: Past and Present," was widely used, and he ended his career as Executive Director of MENC (Music Educators National Conference). There was a period of about twenty years when people would hear my name and ask if I was related to him. What I heard them say over and over was that he was a real gentleman who listened well and could engage people in conversation. Privately, he followed up with ways to advance a budding program, find a scholarship, or an opportunity for learning. He was clearly much loved. This last sentiment was echoed by everyone at his memorial service a few days ago.

In his desk and on his shelves were pictures, letters and cards from students. They were warm and genuine, and since he kept them, he must have sensed the love that was there. The music

my uncle made was depicted in photos of him from behind, lifting his arms in front of his choirs. But the real music he made was relational—how he affected the people around him.

In retirement, he and my aunt astonished everyone by taking 70 cruises around the world. Taking up the most space on his shelves were twenty-five large photo albums chronicling every trip in order, including every evening gown and tuxedo, and every daytime port of call.

How do you pack up someone's life in three days? What do you take and what do you leave behind when it is time to go? I wrapped up the family photos and the two small paintings. I took copies of his book. I folded some letters and photos from grateful students into a large envelope. The rest had to be sold or disposed of. It was hard to do, but in several trips I was able to get the photo albums down to the recycling chute. Greece, Spain and France aboard the Crystal Symphony. The Panama Canal on the Crystal Harmony. I felt guilty. They looked so happy in their respective gown and evening jacket. A quick tilt, a fall down a chute, and the compactor engine in the basement took over.

It made me think—what would happen one day if a relative came to call with a key and too little time to do justice to what I leave behind? What are the things that they would find that lead to a sense that I made some contribution to this world?

What is the particular music that *you* make that creates harmony and soothes this world? If some raffish nephew, or beloved son, daughter or friend came with the key to unlock your private world next week, what would they keep that would demonstrate that your life mattered, and what would be the stuff they simply threw away? What do they save, and in the end, what amongst it all, saves you?

In churches all over the world today, bread is broken and wine is poured. The celebration of World Communion Sunday is to remind Christians that we all share in these elements that are most common to our faith, no matter how different we are. Although the celebration revolves around the sacrament of Communion in the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples, what is truly sacred about this day is the recognition that we all partake in trying to live out with integrity, the central theme of his ministry and the great commandments he gave.

(*Mark*) “28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

People come to church looking for meaning for their lives. They come to find a place to bring their pain, to be known, to find a community, to believe that there is something greater than them and that they are loved. The message, which we discern and practice with so many variations in the many different kinds of churches Christians attend, brings us to the most common of all denominators. Jesus told us to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is not always an easy thing to do, and sometimes it seems impossible to extend our love across the many divides that exist.

We come to church today after hearing about tidal waves in the Samoas. Almost a third of our local UCC churches are Samoan, and today there is a service in South Los Angeles at one of our churches, and a call for volunteers. Our Samoan churches are leading a relief effort that you can help with.¹

We arrive at church this morning after reading about devastating earthquakes in Indonesia. Funds from One Great Hour of Sharing are being released in order to send relief right away. As

you know, your church was close to the top giving church in the country for this fund, and your generosity of last year is now in the hands of relief effort co-coordinators there.

Finally this morning, there is a collection for Neighbors in Need, which provides assistance when tragedies strike here at home. But none of this is to say that our checkbooks are what make us Christian. This kind of giving is but a tangible sign that we are trying to live out, in one of any number of ways, the commandment to love God and our neighbor as ourselves.

What is the music that we make in our brief time that glorifies God? What refrains and bridges of the songs of our own lives will still reverberate to let others know that we were here? You are all practicing your faith in your own unique way perhaps in the belief that what we do, say and pray in this place will lead us to leave behind signs that we followed these two great commandments that Jesus lifted above all others.

Rob, thank you for the music that you have made in this place. Your talent is clearly obvious to anyone, and over the years you have formed a lasting bond with this congregation. I will remember the soaring moments, from Easter brasses to your clear tone when you lead us in the Taizé singing. But the real music that you made here that we will remember most is relational. It is in how you formed friendships—your humor, your gentleness, and your great personal style and maturity is what we will be the music we will be hearing long after you conduct the last “Alleluia” today. Personally, thank you for being a great friend and colleague. You have set a vision for music here, and we will keep it alive as we work with Tina in the months to come.

Bring your pain, your gift of humanity, the song of God you are to this table today, and eat and drink hope with believers all over this world. This is an open table—no matter who you are or where you are on your faith journey, you are welcome here.

Sermon Resources

1. A service of worship in remembrance of the victims who lost their lives due to the tsunamis and earthquake that devastated islands of both Samoas will be held at Samoan Congregational Christian Church of South L.A. UCC at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, October 4, 2009.

The Service will be held at: Samoan Congregational Christian Church of South L.A. UCC
1249 E. Carson Street, Carson, CA 90745

If anyone is interested in volunteering to help with sorting and packing of donated supplies or providing meals for volunteers, you may contact Foai Tanuvasa at (310) 592-6532.

Scripture for Sunday, October 4, 2009

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