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Today is Jazz Sunday. It's probably not accurate to say that everybody loves jazz, but everyone in my family does, including me. So I've thought quite a bit about what it is that makes jazz unique. Like everything else this Sunday, the answer is going to come in three parts.

Jazz is improvisational.

Jazz is relational.

And Jazz is thematic, with a central motif that keeps returning.

That needs a bit of 'splaining. Improvisational means it's not written down, note for note, like classical music, nor is it learned by rote so as to sound the same way every time it's played. Jazz has a lot of room for creativity, within wide parameters. When you go to play a jazz gig, you bring something called a "real book" that gives you the basic chords and structure, but leaves the rest to you and the band. Jazz is improvisational.

Jazz is relational. It's not often performed with just one person – or if it is, it is played with another part in the imagination or with an audience. It is a music that is not about individual virtuosity so much as it is about being in touch with, being in relationship with, another part and working together. "Trading fours" is a sort of competitive jazz conversation which is like the back and forth of a call and response. Jazz is relational.

And jazz is thematic. It's all about one musical idea, or phrase, or even a metaphor.

That is linked to the relational factor: even the most wild, far out part is somehow

connected to the theme. There's a center to it, a core, something that keeps coming back. Jazz is thematic.

Jazz: Improvisational. Relational. Thematic.

Now we're taking a big leap: I suggest that our faith, our Christianity, is really a lot like jazz, for the very same three reasons.

Christianity at its best is improvisational. What am I saying: that it changes all the time, that we make it up as we go along? That's only one little part of the meaning of the word "improvisation". It's more about being creative, often more in form than in content. It's about using whatever we have to bring to the task at hand. It's about being active in the moment. I don't know about you, but the times I have felt the most true to my faith are the times that I've stretched to do the right thing, the Christian thing, even if it was in an unusual way using unusual resources. Think about it for a moment: is your practice of your faith improvisational?

Christianity is ALWAYS relational. It could be said that you really can't be a Christian all by yourself, in a vacuum. As a Christian you are part of a community – that's how Jesus called us, two by two – and all the ways you live out your faith have to do with other people. You worship together; you care for others together; you sing together; you eat together. Everything about being Christian is relational.

And Christianity has a theme, a central idea to which we all keep returning. At the center of the living Christian faith is LOVE. That topic is also in three parts. Today we celebrate the ancient Christian holiday of Trinity, in which we claim our belief that the

one God comes to us in three ways as Creator , as our Savior, and as Holy Spirit, the presence that is in and around us at all times.

An Episcopalian colleague, James Lemier, says that “the ancient belief of God as Trinity is most importantly a belief about the love of God: that God loves us enough to be the Creator who created the whole universe and every creature... that God loves us enough to be the Redeemer who has saved the world from sin, sorrow and separation so that we might be joined to that love forever... that God loves us enough to be the Spirit/Guiding God who is at work in us inspiriting, strengthening, guiding, advocating and illuminating us in our living.”

Christianity is improvisational. Relational. Built around one theme of love.

And here’s the irony: for decades preachers like me were taught in seminary to have a three point sermon, each point stated, developed and then promoted. You might say that I’m doing that now, for Jazz Sunday. But then, like jazz itself, it’s not exactly a linear argument. Not point A, point B, point C and done. No: it’s a repetition, a circling through, a weaving of a theme through an entire performance, an entire exposition of God’s Word. Love. In three parts.

“For God so loved the world.”

The same minister I quoted above, James Lemier, tells this wonderful story on himself and some members in a church that he served for many years. One family went home for their Sunday dinner around the table – as I remember we used to do, in my family – and they were talking about the minister’s sermon. (We always like to hear that, we preachers, that someone has actually heard what we say, and retained it well enough

to actually talk about it!) As the adults were conversing, their second-grade daughter seated with them chimed in: “Oh, Rev. Lemier’s sermons, they are always the same. You know... blah, blah, blah, LOVE.” Well the minister himself was very amused by this story, and thought to himself “Hey, this little girl really got it... the message, the repetition, the core, and the redundancy.

Blah, blah, blah LOVE! Even if the fine three point sermon escapes you, you at least walk away with the central theme of LOVE

The “concept” of Trinity has been fought over for most of two thousand years by those left-brained folks who want a complete intellectual explanation of it. Actually Trinity is much better described by the artists, by the right-brained people who produce paintings and stories, poems and songs. Jazz is a perfect medium for the expression of God’s love. Love is something to be described rather than explained. We abide in love, we are baptized in that love of Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, we are welcomed into that love as soon as it finds us.

God is not a static unchanging thing. God is not disconnected from us, or from any part of creation. God’s essence is being relational and dynamic. God connects through the relationships we experience and enjoy.

THE most important call and purpose of the church to welcome everyone to God’s love. A love which creates, redeems and inspires. Loving relationship is at the heart of God, and at the heart of the body of Christ we call the church. In today’s scripture from Matthew, Jesus’ last “last words” to his disciples were baptize, proclaim, and teach. Again in threes, these three action verbs are the means of improvisation and relationship on the theme of love. This love is urgent, something we must move with now, a compelling thing to proclaim and teach.

Blah blah blah love. Improvise. Relate. Return to the theme, which is Love.

Benediction

God sends us from this place to improvise on the Good News.
To reach out in relationship to those around us.
To live out the love God has given us.
May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
And the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.