

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year C: A Spirituality of Dissonance
4pm Jazz Vespers Service at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church

Song: Temperance & Gluttony

Reflection I - Seven Heavenly Virtues and the Seven Deadly Sins

Move I

In 590 CE, Pope Gregory I created a list of seven virtues and seven vices by gathering pieces from Christian tradition as enshrined in the church, various teachings throughout the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures, and the various do and do not lists of the New Testament (the fruits of the spirit vs the fruits of the body), and melded them together to create a list of vices (known as the seven deadly sins) and virtues (the seven Heavenly Virtues). They are coupled as follows;

Chastity & Lust
Temperance & Gluttony
Generosity & Greed
Diligence & Laziness
Patience & Wrath
Kindness & Envy
Humility & Pride

In the spiritual dualism of the day, the Christian was called to live into the qualities and attributes of one list, the Heavenly Virtues, over those of the other, the Seven Deadly Sins.

Easy, right? Just follow the good list as the Pope has prescribed and a life of heavenly virtue shall be given unto you.

Except it's really not that simple. Inasmuch as it's easy to draw two parallel lists from the Bible by cherry-picking a few verses here, a few verses there, it's almost just as easy to find biblical exceptions to each of these pairings. It's also just as easy to imagine pastoral exceptions to each pairing?

Chastity & Lust – queer teenager in conservative town who explores their sexuality by seeing male-on-male kissing in a film about love? Ruth and Naomi, according to Gender-queer readings of the Hebrew Bible the two women who cling to one another more than embracing their respective widowhoods or the demands of the men in their life.

Or take Diligence & Laziness. Consider how a young adult who grew up in an over functional, busy home and that now practices a nightly rhythm of rest – a form of resistance against his overscheduled childhood. Or what about Judeo-Christians observations of the Sabbath, a day on which we are called to rest after the example of God resting on the seventh day

of creation from the book of Exodus? Consider the story of the Puritan settlers of New England watching a barndoor fly off the cattle enclosure during a storm.

There's even a book called the "The Seven Deadly Virtues," ed. by Jonathan V. Last that seeks to complicate the narrative by suggesting how the virtues can themselves become the vices. Take for example, Humility & Pride. If we say as Christians, "ah, we have humility and you are prideful," then how conceited are we! To the oppressed, the marginalized, and the othered, voicing Pride can be a means of claiming one's identity as created by God – a fact that our Queer, Indigenous, and Black siblings know well.

My point is this; for each of the seven deadly sins and the seven heavenly virtues, there can be a temptation to simply pick one of the lists and stick with it. But nowhere is such a teaching found in scripture, and nowhere does Jesus voice this. Rather, I would invite you to consider the two lists as banisters along the path of life – means by which we can check in with ourselves about where we stand on anyone of these given spectrums. Has my generosity genuinely served to help others, or am I becoming greedy in my need for recognition? Is this a feeling of need or one of greed? Or consider patience & wrath; have I been patient or am I silently withholding my anger? Is my anger Christ-like, serving to give voice to injustices that I have felt and those of my neighbour, or am I acting out of a place of harmfulness?

Interlude: *Generosity & Greed, Diligence & Laziness*

Reflection II The Emancipation of Dissonance

Move I

Mr. Holland's Opus (1995 film where Richard Dreyfus stars as Glenn Holland, a music-teacher that feels he's never really made it as a big musician); one of themes is listening to John Coltrane's music – music that he doesn't really get, but as he goes through life comes to appreciate deeply. Over the course of the film, he comes to appreciate Coltrane's music, heavy with consonance and dissonance, very deeply.

So what is consonance? What is dissonance? [Teaching]

There's a teaching from the book of Proverbs that says, "The full soul loathes a honeycomb, but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet,"¹ or according to a more contemporary translator, "when you are full, you will refuse honey, but when you are hungry, even bitter food tastes sweet."² For many of us, the music Steve is offering is sweet to us; it speaks to the challenges we navigate as we consider virtues (consonance) and vices (dissonance). In fact, living purely in consonance can become a sort of dissonance (illustrate)

¹ Proverbs 27:7 (KJ21)

² Proverbs 27:7 (GNT)

Speaking to a journalist in 1941, Ellington said, “That's the Negro's way of life. Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part.”³

This is what Arnold Schoenberg calls “the emancipation of dissonance.” In his 1926 essay titled “Opinion or Insight?” Writing about the doctrinal arguments between those who prefer consonance (also known as tonality) over dissonance (also known as atonality), Schoenberg says, “But how are they to do so if their path is laid down by strict laws which come from a foundation of deep insight and show that the Way of the Cross indeed exists, but no cross-roads; and that to have reached a 'parting of the ways' is a sure sign that one has already strayed out of the world of art?” (Schoenberg 258).

Like the Way of Jesus, Schoenberg wants us to embrace the expression we are called to offer, rather than getting bogged down in bi-partisan squabbles. He writes that, “...Problems have arisen which are not to be solved by partisan belief, but only through insight. Belief is sweet, and it makes for happiness, but religions themselves develop, since their tendency is to come ever nearer to perfect insight into the Divine Essence. So if belief views the ultimate truth as a variable, why should it be entitled to pronounce judgement, in art, against living certainties?” (Schoenberg, 258).

He takes it even one step further, saying that those who pick only one side, “[B]etray their God, but remain on good terms with those who call themselves His attorneys. They use accidentals and key-signatures to fit the key that would like to hold sway, as if putting on a Christian-German mantle for loving their neighbour (something they rarely used to wear), to cloak their secret, sinful converse with dissonances. Perhaps this has not much to do with art.” (Schoenberg, 259).

These are painful words, when we consider that he was living through the rise of the German-Christian movement, a faction in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich that lifted Hitler to the same status as Jesus, an Aryan Messiah.

It's for this reason that Schoenberg proclaims that, “‘The emancipation of the dissonance.’ That is to say, it came to be placed on an equal footing with the sounds regarded as consonances.” (Schoenberg, 260).

“I still owe an answer (or, surely, I only seem to) to the question whether one is justified in writing tonally or atonally, or whether the one or the other may even be necessary or impossible... Write or don't write, but in any case don't ask, but do what you can. If you can do something pure, you will be able to do it tonally or atonally; but those who think impurely—that is to say, those who do what anyone can—may go ahead and form tonal or atonal parties, and for that matter make a noise about it. They will certainly shout us down, we who give ear to our destiny; and they will surely be heard, soon and in full measure, by those who are in favour of everything ambiguous but against every thing genuine. If we address ourselves to those people, it is only out of acoustical necessity, since

³ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-intellectual-history/article/something-apart-yet-an-integral-part-duke-ellingtons-harlem-and-the-nexus-of-race-and-nation/46B58AEB337443073C1A7D3102E259A1>.

a literally empty concert hall sounds even worse than one full of 'empty people'.”
(Schoenberg, 263-264)

In his writings on tonality & atonality, consonance and dissonance, I hear an echo of Jesus' words to the faithful, “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”⁴ So, when we consider our living, drawing from the examples of consonance and dissonance in jazz, vice and virtue in Christianity, or the Emancipation of Schoenberg, may we be so bold as to go where we are called – to choose the road less travelled, for it is the same path upon which Jesus goes ahead of us. Amen.

Song: Patience & Wrath

⁴ Revelation 3:15-16 (NRSVue)