

Ordinary Time 13, Year C: *The Heart of A Stranger*

4pm Jazz Vespers Service at St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church

Pride Sunday with The Will Clements Trio

Scripture: Exodus 23:9 (NKJV)

"Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Weekly Word of Wisdom:

"Love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters?"

- James Baldwin

"I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this. I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I would say, sorry, I would much rather go to the other place."

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Form

- (1) Spiritual Life Theme (Reflection 1, Move I), (2) Biblical Text, Christian Tradition (Ref. 1 Move II)
 - Interlude (2 pieces)
 - (3) Ref. 2, Move II), (1) Aspect of Jazz Tradition (Ref. 2, Move I), (4) Closing Integrative Reflection (Ref. 2, Move II). I tend to preach a longer first half, a shorter second half.
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Song: *Nature Boy* (Eden Ahbez)

Reflection I, Move I: *Kairos & Chronos: A Bifocal of Time & Sex*

“There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy. They say he wandered far, very far, over land and sea. A Little shy and sad of eye, but very wise was he,” so the song goes. Partly biographical, partly written in homage to a musical mentor, the tune *Nature Boy* was written by eden ahbez, a Jewish-American pianist, songwriter, and composer, who’s life and work is likely worth a sermon at a different Sunday service. *Nature Boy*, like all great art - from a musical composition to a great painting or a spiritual masterpiece like the New Testament or Bhagavad Gita - can be both a window into the past and function as a framework to interpret the present. Social movements, like Pride Sunday, also have this same effect on us, acting as a sort of bifocal for the past and present. One minute you’re discussing the rise of anti-Trans legislation in Alberta, Kansas, or Wisconsin of recent years, and the next moment you’re discussing the life and work of Marsha P. Johnson and the Stonewall Riots of the 1960’s or the contributions of Vancouver’s *Gay Alliance Toward Equality* in 1971 that led to the establishment of the first Pride Parade in 1978. In other words, Social movements, like great art of any medium, help us step out of what the New Testament or calls “*chronos*” (χρόνος) time, meaning “chronological” or “linear” experiences of time as defined by dominant society, into what the early followers of Jesus called “*kairos*” (καιρός) time, time that is defined by the personal, communal, and societal reordering of the Spirit at play in the world. The difference between

chronos and *kairos* is like the following. In the context of Pride Sunday, experiencing *chronos* time is like remembering the first time you learned about sex in school, but *kairos* time is like remembering the first time you remember having good sex with a person who upheld your life, identity, and worth. Experiencing *chronos* time is like recalling the first time you heard about a group of people or place you might belong to from a book, movie, or personal connection, but experiencing *kairos* time is when you are taken up in loving embrace by your chosen community – a Queer embrace, a loving Gay adult, or being accepted into a 2SLGBTQIA+ affirming safe space, for example. Perhaps in less preacherly language, we could say that *Chronos* tells us about *when* we came out, *kairos* about *truth* of coming out. So, returning to *Nature Boy*, and the idea that great art helps us to illuminate both past and present alike, let's look behind us so that we might like in front of us with greater heart and vision.

Reflection I, Move II: A Very Strange Enchanted Boy (Biblical Theme)

“There was a boy, a very strange, enchanted boy. They say he wandered far, very far, over land and sea. A Little shy and sad of eye, but very wise was he.”

Moses, the traditional author of the book of Exodus, can easily be described as such. Perhaps you've heard of Moses? If not, here's a recap of *Prince of Egypt*. Born a Hebrew but given up to the Nile by force of law in a papyrus basket, only to be found, adopted, and raised by the same Pharaoh who wished his people dead, Moses

was later called to challenge Pharaoh alongside his brother Aaron. Through calling the plagues down upon the land, Moses and Aaron caused Pharaoh to relent, allowing the enslaved Hebrews to leave Egypt, only to be chased into the desert by the armies of an unrepentant pharaoh. Caught “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,” as the old song goes, Moses led his people through the divided waters, only for God to cause the waters to drown the chasing Egyptian army behind them. Once safe, the Israelites wandered in the desert, eventually reaching Mount Sinai, where God called Moses up to the mountainside to talk about the vision God had for God’s people. There were commandments. There were ethical teachings. Some of the teachings were strict laws to be followed. Some of the teachings were aspirational concepts that outlined a renewed vision for humanity away from enslavement, persecution, and violence. But through all the teachings God gave Moses after delivering them from trial after trial, was a simple concept: “...[You] shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”¹ This is one of the core tenants of the book of Exodus: do not oppress others as you have been oppressed. Moses, having the heart of a stranger, even named his son after this experience: “He called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a stranger in a foreign land,”² the name Gershom literally coming from

¹ Exodus 23:9 (NKJV, altered).

² Exodus 2:22b (NKJV).

the Hebrew words “*ger sham*” (גֵּר שָׁם) translating to “a stranger there.”³ Being a stranger in a strange land, while being tasked to have a heart for those who are estranged who walk the way with us, is the truth to which the Exodus narrative, the Pride movement, the jazz tradition, and the progressive/inclusive/compassionate Christian community all witness too. We recognize that our own strangeness – a strangeness like being in love – alienates us from the dominances of Egypt, of empire, of heteronormative patriarchy, a physical and spiritual queerness that calls us into deeper communion with one another to proclaim that “love is love,” and that no stranger falls outside the pale of divine deliverance.

Interlude: *Almost Like Being in Love* (Loewe and Lerner); *The Boy Next Door* (Martin and Blane)

Reflection II, Move III: *Concerned With The Heart of A Stranger* (Jazz Theme)

“And then one day, a magic day he passed my way, and while we spoke of many things, fools and kings, this he said to me: ‘the greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.’” The lyric, “the greatest thing, you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return,” presents a musical setting for the profound concern of the jazz tradition for the heart of the stranger. Jazz has always been a marginal music – born of the unique response of the African American

³ <https://www.behindthename.com/name/gershom>

experience of the transatlantic slave trade, Antebellum South, Jim Crow era, and the struggle for civil rights of the 20th and 21st centuries, jazz has become a haven for those with the heart of a stranger. Right from the very beginning, the Black jazz tradition became a home for the estranged of society: first-generation Eastern European Jews with murdered fathers (Benny Goodman), Lesbian or bisexual Black women (Ma Rainey, Billie Holliday), multiracial persons who did not fit into any segregated space easily (Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus), polyamorous musicians who could not tell the love of God apart from the love they felt of their partners (Duke Ellington), abused girls who grew to be strong women (Ella Fitzgerald, as Pastor Dan preached too last week), or the legions of musicians who struggle with the intermeshing of struggle and blessing that is mental-illness, trauma, and neurodivergence. By virtue of being a music that is founded upon improvisation – improvisation which demands nothing short of the full freedom of expression and interplay of each musical participant – and of the Black American experience, jazz is a music that has always been concerned with the heart of the stranger, to borrow the language from the book of Exodus. Each of these people were strangers in a strange land, each of these people sought to relate their heart of strangeness to a society bent on crucifying the Other. Black. Gay. Jewish. Female. Multiracial. Lesbian. No matter the outward form, the cross they hung on was the same as the Cross that

Christ hung from – no, the cross God *continues* to hang from. But like Christ, many of them rose in resurrection joy, refusing to submit to domination's grasp, offering Joy: Black joy, queer joy, female joy, joyful swing in response to stiff, strait-laced persecution.

Reflection II, Move IV: *Love Him and Let Him Love You* (Integrative Reflection)

Focusing on joy for a moment, let's turn our thoughts for a moment to *The Boy Next Door*, as Will so eloquently sang, *Giovanni's Room*, a 1956 novel by the famed Black American author James Baldwin, tells a similar story about an American man named David who falls in love with an Italian bartender named Giovanni in Paris, and explores themes of love, strangeness, sex, and queer identity. Speaking to David about his complicated feelings for Giovanni, Gay elder Jacques offers a word of wisdom:

“Love him,” said Jacques, with vehemence, ‘love him and let him love you. Do you think anything else under heaven really matters? And how long, at the best, can it last, since you are both men and still have everywhere to go? Only five minutes, I assure you, only five minutes, and most of that, *helas!* in the dark. And if you think of them as dirty, then they will be dirty— they will be dirty because you will be giving nothing, you will be despising your flesh and his. But you can make your time together anything but dirty, you can give each other something which will make both of you better—forever—if you will not be ashamed, if you will only not play it safe.’ He paused, watching me, and then looked down to his cognac. ‘You play it safe long enough,’ he said, in a different tone, ‘and you’ll end up trapped in your own dirty body, forever and forever and forever—like me.’”⁴

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/594996-love-him-said-jacques-with-vehemence-love-him-and-let>.

“Make your time together anything but dirty,” says Jacques to us. Exist in *kairos* time that flows in moments of profound physical, spiritual, emotional, and sexual intimacy. Exist in the present moving and unfolding of the Spirit that invites us toward living in God – such a queerness, if ever I’ve heard. Exist in such strangeness that you feel your own heart caught up in the wholly Other, that you grow from a place of estranged marginality into a God-given sense of Pride that calls you to lift others who are estranged in turn. Earlier this week, Pastor Rhian wrote that, “The Oxford English dictionary defines pride as a feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one’s own achievements, qualities, or possessions that are widely admired. Another definition includes a consciousness of one’s own dignity. I have to say that I love this next understanding of pride: a feeling of honour and self-respect – a sense of personal worth. Quite different from my first encounter with pride. And it is this truth-filled understanding of pride that we celebrate this weekend at the Vancouver Pride March.” May we each be gifted the grace and understanding to know that ‘the greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.’” This includes the self, the other, and the mystery that surrounds our common life. God bless you and keep you this Pride Sunday. Amen.

Song: *Your Eyes* (Will Clements)