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Mozart and the Strangeness of God **John 1: 43- 46; John 8: 56-59**

What was the question Hot Lips Houlihan asked Hawkeye Piece on the TV show MASH?
“How could such talented surgical skills be found in such a lecherous juvenile?”
To which the irrepressible Hawkeye replied, “I can’t help it. I come as a set.”

The world has asked something of the same question of Mozart, this strange child who never really had a childhood, who at age three was already at the keyboard, composing at age five, astonishing royal audiences at age six, giving concerts across the great cities of Europe at age seven. A kid who at age fourteen walked into the Sistine Chapel and heard Gregorio Alegri’s *Miserere*, the text of which was a Vatican secret. Not to Mozart: having heard it once, he went home and wrote the entire composition out note for note from memory.

Yet, for all of his genius, and partially because of it, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart led a hard life. He lost his mother at age twenty-two, as the two of them traveled from city to city pathetically trying to find Mozart a decent-paying job. His father, whom he adored, rejected Mozart in disapproval over his choice of spouse. They died estranged. Four of his six children died in infancy. The Archbishop for whom he worked delighted in humiliating him and stifling his musical advancement. When he did reap commercial success his lack of self-control ensured that expenditures would always exceed income; when the fickle public spurned him, he was nearly destitute. Of a sickly constitution, severe illness plagued him by the time he was thirty. He died at thirty-five. Theologian Karl Barth observed, “Mozart laughed often, but surely not because he had much to laugh about.”

Of course our contemporary public has mostly based its judgment of Mozart on the Oscar-winning movie *Amadeus*, which came from Peter Shaffer’s play by the same name. Mozart historians have complained that the play and movie grossly caricatured the vulgarity and coarseness of the musician. Moreover, they note that the movie’s basic plot centered on a murderous rivalry between Mozart and fellow musician Antonio Salieri. Salieri spent the play cursing God for giving the crude Mozart unparalleled musical genius, when the cause of God would have been better served had such talent been bestowed on someone more conventionally pious, somewhat like, say, Salieri. Once again, the music historians caution us that Salieri and Mozart seem to have had a functional working relationship; Mozart actually selected Salieri as his son’s first music teacher.

But where there is smoke, there is fire. No doubt, Mozart’s astonishing talent did inspire envy and jealousy enough to do him harm. Salieri and others did despise him and often did make his life difficult. Historical evidence suggests that Mozart could be boorish, crude, foolish, juvenile, naïve and impractical, financially irresponsible, incapable of discipline, given to unbridled appetites. To outward appearances, he was not a particularly serious Roman Catholic; his life was frequently riotous and impious.

Though a church musician, his dealings with church officials were marked by tension, not always but sometimes rooted in Mozart's proud, insubordinate behavior. Mozart probably was not fatally poisoned by lethally-envious Salieri, but it is true that most people probably saw Mozart as both a prodigy and a prodigal. People could not help but wonder, how could such incomparable divine music emanate from such a flawed human instrument? I want to suggest an answer to you: mark it down to the strangeness of God, who bestows blessings upon people in a way that does not comport with our expectations.

The occasion of Mozart's 250th birthday is an interesting historical milestone; the fact that he continues to exert a vibrant influence on church and secular music is a noteworthy historical fact. But what truly interests me about Mozart is the strange incongruity between the external impurity of Mozart's life and the internal purity of his art.

In truth, we, no less than the folk of Mozart's day, have certain expectations as to how and through whom God's messages of grace, beauty, and truth should be delivered. For example, as a child growing up in Alabama, I saw that many of the prophetic words uttered by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, now so justly celebrated, fell on deaf ears at the time they were spoken because people could not stomach the prophet. How many hundreds of Baptist preachers of my childhood denounced Dr. King as a communist! The strangeness of his ministry was rooted in the strangeness of God, that is to say, God's marked propensity, to send us truth, beauty and illumination through instruments that violate our sense of order and decorum. Yet within the span of my own lifetime I have seen the inconceivable become indisputable: the words of those hundreds of Baptist preachers stand discredited; Dr. King's ministry is now enshrined as a parable of the in-breaking, eternal Kingdom of God.

It is a short leap from the strangeness of God in Mozart to the strangeness of God in Christ. For the difficulty people of Mozart's day had in accepting the disconnect between purity of art issuing forth from impurity of instrument pales in comparison to accepting the incongruity of the mantle of God's long-awaited Messiah falling upon the shoulders of a carpenter's son from Nazareth.

We see this clearly in the person of Nathanael.

His friend Philip is one of those impulsive creatures amenable to almost any suggestion; all Jesus has to do to recruit him is say, "Follow me."

Nathanael is more suspicious and calculating.

"You say this Messiah is from Nazareth?" he asks. Nathanael grew up in Cana, just a few miles away.

As often happens between small towns, a mutual superiority complex seems to have developed between communities, and Nathanael is not immune to this prejudice: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We cannot be too hard on Nathanael. He has lived nigh to Nazareth all his life;

he knows there is nothing extraordinary about the place or the people.

He knows there is nothing extraordinary about himself, for that matter,

yet not only is he being asked to believe that the Lord's long-looked-for Anointed One is emerging from right next door, but this Messiah is interested in enlisting him as a servant. "Come and see," Phillip bids him.

It takes great creativity of faith to wrap your mind around such strangeness. Yet Nathanael did it.

He became a servant of God and an earthly instrument and disciple of Christ.

It is an altogether different story with the religious leaders with whom Jesus debates.

They are so serious. They are so steeped in tradition.

They hold some rather firm ideas as to what the Lord's Anointed must look like,

and Jesus doesn't fit any of their preconceived criteria! He is as much an affront to their refined senses

as Martin Luther King was to the lily-white segregationist pastors of my upbringing. In fact, Jesus was worse. His ministry represented to the minds of his opponents blasphemy, an affront to God, an insult to holiness. In truth they lacked an appreciation for God's strangeness.

They could not appreciate the divine irony of God's anointed hailing from a cradle in Bethlehem and then a carpenter's shop in Nazareth, now standing before them as the Christ with no more authorization than that of God's vibrant, tumult-causing, life-giving Spirit.

We cannot too much blame them: how often our own sensibilities are mystified by the strangeness of God! I have been an active Christian for most of my life and a professional minister for more than half of it.

I have come to this startling conclusion about God: our Lord truly has a bizarre sense of humor.

A religious skeptic once said that if triangles had a god, you could be sure their deity would have three sides. He was trying to suggest that human beings create God out of their own imagination.

I can only respond that humanity could not create a God so strange, confounding, and mysterious as the God whom history and revelation have revealed.

If we were creating a God, we couldn't imagine a deity strange enough

to call a stuttering, stammering murderer to be the mouthpiece for divine law. Yet God called Moses.

We couldn't imagine a God who summons Israel's greatest king from sheep on a hillside. Yet God called David.

We couldn't conceive of a God who calls Christianity's most profound spokesman from the ranks of its most violent oppressors. Yet God called Saul and made him Paul.

We couldn't conceive of a God who would call a pious, scholarly Roman Catholic monk to be the catalyst for the Protestant Reformation. Yet God called Martin Luther.

Trace the history of God's interactions with humanity and you will find irony, strangeness and a bizarre sense of humor.

I have seen God call the most opposite people into long-lasting friendships.

I have seen God call the most dissimilar people into enduring marriages.

I have come to the conclusion that if we are willing to be an instrument of the living God, we must allow the strangeness of God to transform us.

One night this week I found myself trying to wrap myself around this concept of the strangeness of God. Brain dead, bone tired, I plopped down on the sofa, turned on the television and started channel surfing, a trait characteristic to the male gender. I didn't even have the sound on.

My eye stopped on an old *Andy Griffith Show*, the episode where Andy and Helen are exploring a cave, and Barney and Thelma Lou arrive about the time a portion of the roof collapses.

Barney, who has suffered a series of public embarrassments, sees the chance to redeem himself and hastens to call the whole town to form a rescue squad. Meanwhile, Andy and Helen find a little hole and crawl out. They hitch a ride back to town and are at Helen's cleaning up when they turn on the radio to learn that Barney has issued a call for the public to assist in their rescue.

Not wishing their friend to be humiliated, they hasten back to the cave and sneak back in so Barney's compassionate heroism can be rewarded.

It occurred to me that if some alien being suddenly appeared on my sofa and watched that episode, the alien would be totally mystified by Andy's and Helen's behavior.

Why would people willingly place themselves back in the dark and dusty discomfort of a cave?

I could only answer, they saw it as the Christian thing to do.

The strangeness of God's values had touched these people in such a way that they performed an act inconvenient to themselves in the service of love.

The scene is funny. But what we don't often realize is that undergirding their behavior is the strange, humorous impact of how God's strange values imprint our lives.

If you are going to understand life, you had better keep your eyes and soul open to the strangeness of God. Some of the people who bring God's message to you will in no way correspond to your portrait of a prophet. Some of the people who communicate God's Word to you will be people you wouldn't even call good, people you don't even like.

There are going to be times when God will use you as a mentor, even a saint, to someone else, though you would never see yourself in such a role. Mark it down to the strangeness of God!

There will be events that devastate and frustrate and humble you, but they will open up avenues of grace that you would not have discovered any other way. Mark it down to the strangeness of God!

Some of you will find it utterly strange that your spiritual pilgrimage has brought you into a Baptist church. Mark it down to the strangeness of God!

The strangeness of God has a way of transforming our lives, and if we are not open to it, we may not see God at all.

Karl Barth, perhaps the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, vowed that when he reached heaven, he would first seek an audience with Mozart.

Why? Because he believed that Mozart's music spoke to the totality of God's providence, expressing how the joyous and sorrowful sounds of life ultimately served to speak to the great and positive Yes that God has spoken over all creation.

He thought that Mozart did greater justice to the ultimate and overall grandeur of God's creation than did any preacher or theologian.

For my part, I know Mozart was by no means a perfect Christian, but reading an excerpt from the letter that he wrote his father

on the devastating occasion of his mother's death let me know that his love for God was genuine.

He wrote, I take comfort in three things: first, I have a real sense that God called her unto God's self; second, she died peacefully, beautifully; third, I know that I will see her again, for the same God that called her unto Himself is the God who will one day issue that same call to me and I will go home.

I believe the beauty of Mozart's music flowed out of this fundamental theological certainty.

Though Mozart was a strange instrument, our strange God made great use of him.

May this strange God make use of such strange instruments as you and me, for I am convinced, if we cannot see God in God's strangeness, then we have no chance of seeing God at all.

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