

Dissonance

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1 Peter 2:1-10

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You've just heard the opening phrase from the second movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 5. The first four measures are composed of a basic series of chords. But in the fifth measure the first violins play this phrase - and then it is repeated. And in those few notes, something profound about our faith is revealed.

A composer's job is to decide which notes should be played in what order. Some notes, when played together, sound pleasing and stable to our ears. You could listen to them for a long time without feeling like the composer needs to change the chord. Other notes, however, can sound harsh or unpleasant when played at the same time. They feel unstable, as if they need to resolve or be replaced by other notes so that their dissonance goes away. From a physics perspective, whether a note sounds consonant or dissonant is basically a matter of sound waves. Stable intervals are those whose sound waves line up with each other, while the sound waves of dissonant intervals never quite fit together.

Music composed only of consonant chords can sound simplistic and boring. It is the tension between dissonance and consonance that makes music interesting, that causes music to tug at our heart-strings. Let me give two brief examples. Leonard Bernstein composed the music for "West Side Story." In one song, he wanted to express the longing a young man felt for a girl he just met. So Bernstein took a dissonant interval - a diminished fifth - and built a melody around it. This dissonance longs to resolve up, to the next higher note. With those three notes, Bernstein created this song - "Maria". Later in the musical, the young lovers are together and long for a place, away from gang violence and prejudice, where they can be together. Bernstein takes a different dissonance - a minor seventh - which longs to resolve downward, and created the song "Somewhere."

All music is built around the interplay of consonance and dissonance. Some dissonance is used to express emotions like yearning and anticipation, with their resolution communicating feelings of joy, release and rest. There's a sermon in all this. It isn't much of a stretch to see how the pattern of dissonance and consonance can be applied to our life of faith. We daily feel the tension between the way the world is and the way we believe it can be. We feel the tension between spiritual goals of peace and harmony and the physical realities of anger and war. These tensions lead us to cry out "Why is there so much evil in the world? Why is there so much dissonance in the song of life?"

That's a hard question to answer - one of the hardest questions we can ever ask. Is all dissonance and evil caused by human beings? Much of it is. Much comes from wrong choices and sin, and yet much also comes from the fragility built into life itself - bodies that are prone

to disease, knowledge that is limited and egocentric, a planet that contains violent forces that threaten life even as it allows most life to survive.

Is dissonance and evil caused by the devil, by a power acting contrary to God's will? How ever you understand the nature of evil, we are not dualists believing that Satan or the devil is something co-equal to God and that the universe is a battlefield between two immortal titans, one good and one bad. However, it is true that evil exists and has a reality that is greater and more malevolent than simply being the sum total of individual evildoers. Consider the spirit of evil that possesses a lynch mob or rampaging gang.

Does God allow dissonance and evil to teach us lessons we need to learn in life? As a pianist, I know that I often learned more from the times a performance went badly than from the times I played a piece without mistakes. Yet to believe that God acts in this way is to profess a very harsh theology. The bible does not teach that God sends us hard times so that we will learn from them. God is not the source of suffering. And I don't believe any helpful lesson can fully explain away the painful reality of Alzheimers and pancreatic cancer and schizophrenia, not to mention the Holocaust or genocide.

Questions about the nature of evil are difficult and unable to be resolved by simple answers. The clearest answer about evil was not given with words but rather with a cross upon which an innocent man, the Son of God, died for the world and was raised from the grave to new life.

Most dissonance in our life comes, not from questions about theodicy and the nature of evil, but rather when two conflicting realities come crashing together in our lives and we try to make sense of them both. The New Testament is full of examples of cognitive dissonance. Example 1: The disciples see Jesus walking on the water and good ol' Peter climbs out of the boat to walk toward Jesus. He sees Jesus and believes; he looks down and sees the water and sinks. The dissonance was only resolved when Christ took his hand and helped him back into the boat. (Matthew 14)

Example 2: Martha meets Jesus outside the tomb of her brother Lazarus. One moment she says, "Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God." The next moment, when Jesus tells them to roll away the stone from Lazarus' tomb, she says, "Wait Lord, there will be a smell because he's been in there four days!" Dissonance for Martha existed between the power of the living Messiah and the perceived power of tombs and death. (John 11)

And then there's the man whose son had dangerous epileptic seizures. When Jesus told him that the boy could be healed, since all things are possible for those who believe, the man's reply was a classic answer of dissonance: "I believe; help my unbelief." (Mark 9)

Dissonance happens all the time. Two world views come together and clash and long for resolution, for consonance. The theologian James Gustafsson calls them intersections – such as the intersection of religious talk and science talk, faith language and medical language. An aging parent rapidly is losing her memory: one side of our brain wants to know about medical treatments and therapies that can delay this deterioration; the other side asks about the value

of her life in God's eyes even if she can no longer remember that she has a spouse, a child, or details of her rich past.

Sometimes at these life intersections there are no easy answers. Some dissonance is never fully resolved. But just as we have two eyes and see the world in stereoscopic vision, by grace we learn to see the truth on both sides of the dissonance equation. We believe in the One who walks on water, even if we still sink beneath the waves. We believe in the One who calls forth Lazarus from the tomb even as we spend our time grappling with the end of life and the finality of the grave. We trust in the One who is not surprised to hear us say paradoxically, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief."

And in the verses we heard read from I Peter, faithful dissonance was at the heart of the passage's message about "living stones." Stones aren't alive – and yet, in Christ, the stony creatures that we are come alive, and are molded and shaped and made into living buildings, houses of faith where God dwells and acts and Christ's good news is proclaimed to us and through us.

Here's what I hope you'll remember from this sermon. Dissonance is present in every life. But there is something built into us that longs for the dissonance to resolve, for consonance to be heard and experienced. It is more than just physics and sound waves. It is something built into who we are as physical-spiritual creatures. Against Freud, this drive for consonance is not just wish-fulfillment. Against Darwin, this desire for consonance is not just a tool for survival of the fittest. Against Nietzsche, this desire for consonance is not just a back and forth game between our rational side and our emotional side. No, we have been made by God our Creator to know when our lives are out of synch and dissonant, and to yearn to be back in order and consonant. We know what peace feels like, what trust is about, why hope is so important. We have not been made for dissonance but for resolution, for wholeness, for consonance.

In replying to agnostics, say to them that this is one of the marks of our spiritual reality. This is part of how we know there is a God. This is part of the mystery of life, as physical-spiritual creatures fearfully and wonderfully made. This is why Augustine said it so well in the opening paragraph of his Confessions: Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.

On this day may God move you from dissonance to consonance by gracefully changing your behavior and priorities. On this day may God move you from dissonance to consonance by helping you find your place among these living stones, children of God like you seeking their place in the building of God. On this day may God move you from dissonance to consonance as you answer the call you've always heard, you've always trusted on some level, you've always known to be real and eternally significant. And on this day, may your hearts no longer be restless as they finally, finally find their rest in God.

AMEN