

**VARIATIONS ON A THEME; JOHN 10:11-18; MAY 3, 2009 – JAZZ SERVICE  
THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**First, a parable:** A few years ago the famous jazz trumpet player and director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, Wynton Marsalis was playing as a sideman of all things in a Greenwich Village jazz club. He was well into a particular, classic number which featured an awe-inspiring solo by the trumpet including a portion that quieted to almost a whisper.

Just as Marsalis was entering the whisper in his solo and you could have heard a pin drop someone's cell phone went off. It had one of those cute, obnoxious ring tunes. It was like dropping a bomb on the stage: the moment, the performance was apparently lost; heads turned, snickers could be heard, unhappy campers muttered under their breath.

But then Marsalis without missing a beat transitioned into a variation of the cell phone ring on his trumpet, played it long and captivatingly enough not just to catch everyone's attention but to transform the disaster into part of his performance. Then, deftly, he transposed back into the solo he was performing right where he left off, recapturing the audience, the moment, and the music.

**Second, a comment about today's service:** Here we are in the midst of a wonderful jazz worship service. One of the biggest wars going on now in the church is not over theology but over music. What is acceptable, what isn't? According to whom?

From jazz to western European classical to African to rock to folk, you name it, faith communities are experimenting with the music they use in worship.

The debate about music in the church is a good thing because it validates the old truth that we can worship God with whatever we have, whoever we are. The opposite would not be good – if all we had were one or two acceptable forms of music, or forms of worship for that matter. Religion becomes calcified, turns from its natural radiance into rigid rules for living when it refuses to change.

What I'm saying is that a certain amount of change in our religious life even in the inner sanctum of the sanctuary is not only good but necessary if our faith is to remain vital. And here it is important to remember that God, not the people, is the audience when it comes to worship.

The symbols, rituals and customs for worship come from the life of the people to be sure, yet the benchmark for what symbols and rituals are appropriate is what speaks to and for our lives—our struggle with brokenness and our quest for wholeness.

Not just western European classical music but blues and folk and jazz and, yes, even rock and roll can work because these are forms of music that emerged and are still emerging from different corners of the human family. We may prefer classical or plain chant but a diet of those alone will exclude some from offering to God from the marrow of their bones – as only music can – an expression of their thanksgiving and praise of God and their need for God's direction or healing in their lives.

I'm not suggesting that we have different music every Sunday but I am saying that it would be odd, if not elitist, to make a principle out of accepting some forms of music and not others based on our comfort level.

Variations on the themes of our lives and our gratitude and need for God as expressed in our worship music is like drawing a circle either narrow or wide around the worshippers.

We can't be all things to all people, though the great apostle says that's not a bad goal, but realistically we can seek in our music and worship – and hospitality, mission and opportunities to serve – to widen that circle.

**Third, a comment on the Scripture:** Today's reading talks about Jesus as the good and faithful shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand would never stick around if a wolf appeared, said Jesus, because the hired hand doesn't care about the sheep. But Jesus is willing, of his own volition, he says, to face whatever danger or difficulty he must to gather the sheep into one fold and the sheep will know him he says.

You might say those are the recognizable notes, the theme, of the Christian life – the willingness to give our lives away for others, like the founder of our faith.

There are as many ways as there are people in this room. Each of us, when we follow Jesus in the circumstances of our lives is a variation on that theme and if we are true to the theme others will recognize it and find their way into the fold.

Like a man I was talking to the other day. He said you know I always aspired to being an eloquent speaker in front of a large crowd of sophisticated people but what I discovered is that I am really effective in the 'basement of the church' as he called it; where people are seeking healing and recovery. That's where I've learned God wants to use me.

I took from that man's comment that it didn't matter ultimately whether you play the variation of Christ in your life—whether you give yourself away in a church basement or in a corporate office or across the backyard fence. But it is important to find our voice or instrument so to speak.

Wynton Marsalis uses the trumpet more effectively than the cello I would guess. My friend likes the one-on-one, face-to-face encounter in a small circle of people; others have different voices, different gifts.

My hunch is that some of us will have the opportunity, this week, maybe even today to take our turn at a solo – and you can bet that the world will seek to distract us like it did the great trumpet player that night in that Greenwich Village night club.

In fact, that's the adventure of taking our part in the ongoing improvisation of the Gospel in our everyday lives. We don't know what cell phone or distraction will interrupt us – a diagnosis from the medical tests; the suffering of a family member or child; the loss of some cherished opportunity.

But the challenge is to take whatever life gives us and weave it into Christ's song of good news and hope and justice that has resounded from his followers for centuries. If we've know that song which I suspect most of us do or we wouldn't be here today, God will enable us to play it with eloquence and grace and style wherever we are. Amen.