



Grace Lutheran Church
July 17, 2022 6th Sunday after Pentecost

“The Mysterious Power of Music”
[Colossians 1:15-28](#)

For more than 2,000 years the cross of Christ has been an agent of healing, of hope, and of restoration. Sadly in these last days it has also been used as an instrument

of division by those who wield it as a means of asserting power and control over others. To those who dare do this, I would say: Is this in any way representative of the Jesus Christ who comes to us in the holy scriptures?

Consider today’s second reading. Who do we see disclosed in Colossians 1? Not a leader who is out for power and control but the one who is the image of the invisible God, the God whose essence is love who otherwise would be hidden from us. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, God who has come to earth in human form as one who knows and share our struggles, God who we can know intimately as one like us in every way except without sin.

Colossians 1 tells us even more. Jesus is not just the face of God for us but the one through whom all things were made and *in whom all things hold together*. All things meaning ALL – dolphins, whales, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, trees, all living things. Atmosphere, the nutrients in the soil. Jesus Christ is the very fabric of the cosmos! How can we even begin to fathom this?

We can’t. But I want to suggest that music gives us another image of God, a window into this same mystery in a way that perhaps we *can* begin to grasp.

Music of course is not just something Johann Sebastian Bach invented 300 years ago, although Bach lovers such as Bill Shaffer would agree that Bach perfected the art of music in a way that no human mind likely will ever surpass.

What if we were to consider that music, which is governed by the same kinds of properties that reside in all created things, came into being at the very moment the universe was created? Could not the Big Bang have been the very first piece of music, a kind of symphonic eruption? Although vibrations do require air in order to be heard, since sound is created by air molecules bumping into each other. But who’s to say there was not some kind of celestial atmosphere at the very beginning? And if so, isn’t that first symphony of creation still reverberating across the universe?

From a scientific perspective, music is the skillful arrangement of sound waves by using the tones of the harmonic series that are embedded by natural law into each fundamental wave length. The building blocks of this harmonic series are the tones of that make up the major triad – fundamental, fifth, and third, with the other tones added as the

fundamental length is divided into smaller parts. Musical composition is the art of arranging these different lengths of vibration. Put them together horizontally and you have melody; vertically, and you have harmony.

The mystery of music lies in how composers arrange these horizontal and vertical combinations in a way that reveals something about the human condition and our place in the universe, something that goes beyond the power of words to express. Just as we cannot describe who Christ is, we cannot fully account for music's expressive properties. If music was no more than words, we would not be singing hymns, we'd just be reciting the text together. It is the addition of these tones, these horizontal and vertical vibrations, that lifts us into a place where we discover truths about ourselves and our relationship to God that we'd never have encountered otherwise.

The best hymns give us what we call a perfect marriage of text and tune, in which the music opens up deeper meanings within the word we are singing. I'd like to show you what I mean with a hymn based on today's reading from Colossians. The words are a poetic rendering by Susan Cherwien, and the musical setting is by Richard Hillert, the composer of our ELW Setting 3, that my husband Bill and I actually commissioned him to write many years ago. [View the hymn here.](#)

I have always thought of Colossians 1:15 as one of the most enigmatic verses in the Bible: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation." Hillert's setting plunges us into that mystery. Listen to how it begins:

What is the mystery? Well, it begins in the most unlikely way imaginable--with the major seventh degree of the scale on the downbeat. A composition teacher would tell you that this should never happen. The downbeat, the solid beginning of a piece, is always honored by one of the primary notes of the scale – usually the tonic, or home pitch; maybe the fifth; possibly the third. The seventh degree, by contrast is the weakest of all the notes of the scale. Its purpose is merely to be a passing tone, getting us from one place to another, or a leading tone, taking us quickly to a more important note. The seventh degree is never supposed to be the main event!

But it is here, with the specific purpose of launching us on a journey into the heart of this verse from Colossians. By starting on the most obscure note of the scale, we are plunged us into a mystery. What is going on here? Where are we? What's happening and where could we be going?

The mystery deepens in the second measure as we come back to this same scale degree but now with a flat in front of it – B-flat instead of B-natural. This note isn't even in the key we're supposed to be in, C major. The mystery deepens further as the tune unfolds, to the point that when the tune comes to an end we literally have no idea where we are. Even though it concludes on the tonic chord – C-G-E-C, it doesn't feel like home at all. It feels as if that last chord is leading us somewhere else, but the stanza is over – we never arrive.

To my mind this is a brilliant expression of the mystery of Christ. Try as we might, we can no more account for the expressive power of music than we can for the mystery of how Jesus Christ is the image of the unseen God, or how with Christ as the firstborn of creation the cosmos must therefore itself bear the image of Christ. These are realities we can accept only by faith, just as Mary sat at Jesus' feet in Bethany and took in, unquestioning, everything he told her.

But faith is not just about getting to know God. It is about going out, as Mary and Martha would later do, and bearing witness to the reconciliation of all things that has already taken place in Jesus Christ. Bearing witness means calling out the ways in which Satan has not yet gotten the message of reconciliation. Bearing witness means pointing out when power is sought under the false flag of Christian faith. Bearing witness means attesting to those in positions of power who put others in harm's way instead of caring for their well-being. And bearing witness means drawing boldly and tirelessly on the reconciling power of music and of Jesus Christ to heal divisions and bring people together. We really can't sing enough, and I thank God every day for the amazing gift of music so that, through our song, we may come to know the living Christ.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven. Amen.