

“A Community of Practice, Not a Community of Perfection”

Date: July 3, 2011

Theme: grace, forgiveness

Place: Lakewood UMC

Occasion: 3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Romans 7:15-25a

When your child is playing a musical instrument, that is rented from the school instead of owned by you, there is a *big* decision to make at the end of the school year. Do you pay rental fees for the summer break? Or do you turn the instrument in?

Paying rental fees for the summer means that the instrument is practiced on hot summer days and during beautiful sunsets. Turning the instrument in means that summer is for swimming, sleeping in, flexible schedules, and peace and quiet. Your decision is based both on the passion of your budding musician for their instrument, and on your personal preferences.

For parents, on the one hand, there is the knowledge that structure, practice and commitment are all good things for a young musician. On the other hand, there is the prospect of a few weeks *without* squeaks and squawks, without hearing the same fractured tune repeated over and over again. Can you say, *It's a small world after all?*

Professional musicians, as well as garage-band guys, the Christmas party piano-player and the community band enthusiast - all seem to make their music effortlessly. But it took a lot of squeaky-squawky, off-key, eardrum bruising moments to get to the degree of ability where, suddenly, they were making music.

Music that brings ecstasy and enchantment. Music that channels creativity and sparks the imagination. Music that brings a party to life. Okay, the *hope* of that musical ability is why DO pay for that instrument over the summer.

When it sounds good, it looks easy. But it took a lot of practice to get to that

point of sounding good. So why is it that we will put up with the imperfections of kids learning to play a musical instrument, but we find it so much harder to put up with the mistakes that we all make when we are engaged in “practicing” the greatest instrument we have each been given? What instrument is that, you ask?

That instrument is the living Spirit of Christ, within each of us.

The Church is best described as a “community of practice.” A place where those who have chosen to live the life of Christ can hit flats and sharps, miss entrances, go off-beat, and even get completely lost for a while, and yet still be a part of the church community’s “practice session,” which is Christ’s Church.

You see, growing a soul is like learning any musical instrument - it is a lifelong project. Yes, it brings great joy. Yes, it brings focus and direction. Yes, it brings a love of artistic perfection. But it does take continual, gradual, life-long practice.

In other words, we are a community of practice, and not a community of perfection. We strive to do our best to live the Christian life, and yet, in spite of our best efforts, we sometimes fail. At times, in spite of our baptism, we still have habits that are not very Christ-like. There are even times, albeit sad times, when we simply walk away from being a follower of Jesus. We think its too much bother.

And Jesus still takes us back, washes us off, and puts the clothes of righteousness onto our backs. We come back to Jesus, confessing that we have failed Him, that we have wandered away. We tell the Lord that we messed up, *again*. The apostle Paul understood the struggle that goes on in a Christian’s life, the constant pull between the old way of life, and the new creation that we are becoming in Christ.

In today’s lesson, it is not surprising that it took Martin Luther and the other

reformation theologians to shift the focus of Paul's words away from the "pre-Christian Saul, to the "post-Christian Paul." Struggling against the pull of failure, admitting the imperfection of the individual, was part of the new "Reformed" vision of the Church. How sad, that many of the churches that grew out of the Reform movement now find it difficult to nurture the failed and faltering and fallen within their flock.

Many people have told me, that what they most dislike about some churches they have visited, or perhaps been a part of, is the judgmentalism. As long as you toe the line, as long as you follow the rules, as long as you're a good boy or a good little girl, you'll get along fine. But break one of the rules, and they come down hard on you.

For Paul, there is one and only one tuning fork to the eternal. Jesus the Christ is God's Perfect Pitch. Christ alone is perfect. All Christians strive to tune their lives to the perfect pitch which was His life.

We all know people who are tuning their instruments to all the wrong tuning forks: wealth, fame, celebrity, merriment. But all the fake tuning forks cannot "soothe the soul." In Christ alone we find the perfect pitch by which to tune our lives, and find ourselves in harmony with our Creator.

The Church is an orchestra of instruments that needs constant tuning. Daily, sometimes hourly, tuning. Just like any musical instrument. And it is the Church that Jesus picked from the beginning to be a community, where people could practice their instruments, and conduct their tune-ups.

If ever there was a cast of cast-offs, it was Jesus' chosen twelve. Start with the earliest gospel, Mark, where the disciples just don't get it. One theologian refers to them as the "Duh!-ciples." Do they ever get it? At one point Jesus exclaims,

“How dull you are!” At another point he mutters in frustration, “Have I been with you so long a time and you still don’t understand?” What a blessing to every generation of followers who came after them, to know that the original twelve didn’t “get it” right away.

The ones who walked with Jesus, who witnessed his miracles, who were imbued with healing powers, were slow learners who needed constant tune-ups. Even as close as they were to Jesus, their instruments were squeaky and squawky, out-of-tune, and without much hope of harmonic grace. Through-out their special time with Jesus, when they could be with him, one on one, they still needed to practice.

Do you get the point? The disciples are us. Every person in the pew makes up the church, the body of Christ. But we are crippled and compromised by our very nature. We want to do good, but....yadda, yadda, yadda... we don’t do good. In fact, we do bad. But the bad is not what we really wanted to do.

Everyone who walks in the doors of the church is a person who is learning to “play” their life, their faith, their love. And playing is the right metaphor. You don’t “work” a violin; you “play” a violin. The greatest beauty and artistry comes not from work but from play.

But play requires practice. Playing without apparent effort, without the appearance of work, that is our goal. But that kind of playing takes a lot of practice. The church is not the concert hall for those who have gotten it right. The church is the practice room for those who working on their scales, exercising eternal etudes, making mistakes, getting the rhythm wrong.

The church is the place where even Paul could admit that he didn’t get it all right. Yet, he was working on it. If Paul could admit he hit wrong notes, can’t we

offer grace to our current disciples? The people who come sit in our church pews are “practitioners,” not “perfect people.” Can we be a community of practice?

We put up with our kids learning to play their instruments, whether it be the drums or the clarinet, because we love them. Sometimes we have to block our ears. Sometimes we have to grit our teeth. But we don’t tell our kids how awful they are. We encourage them. We grin and bear it. Why?

Because we love them. Do we love each other enough to be a community of practice?