

LISTENING WELL FOR SYMPHONIC TRUTH

ALEC ARNOLD, MA, ThM

One of my favorite singer/songwriters is Tom Waits, whose gravelly voice once was described as sounding like it had been “soaked in a vat of bourbon, left hanging in the smokehouse for a few months, and then taken outside and run over with a car.” Needless to say, it’s Waits’ skill as a songwriter that has gained him the most recognition. If people do know his tunes, it’s probably because a more radio-friendly crooner has put some polish on his songs.

Waits says every good song needs at least three things to be “anatomically correct”: “You need weather, you need the name of the town, [and] something to eat.” Clearly, he sees value in providing an audience with specific details. Without some concrete details to give a story shape—that is, without context—we find ourselves unable to relate to the characters portrayed, unable to get on the “inside” of their particular transformations, epiphanies, disappointments and victories. It might seem paradoxical, but we actually need these characters to fully occupy their own time and place in order for their meaning to register tangibly and truly, beyond their given moment.

An aesthetic concern for particularity and the personal has a few points in common with Christian faith and a Catholic approach to health care ministry. In the first place, theologically speaking, the “scandal” of the Incarnation has everything to do with the way in which the Creator himself got on the “inside” of our humanity, taking on our flesh in a particular time and place. And yet, Christians believe, this singular life and death have somehow become efficacious for the redemption of all the world.

Secondly, in terms of our own practice of ministry, this same Redeemer invites each one of us, precisely as the characters we are, to function as his living body in the world today, which includes extending his



personal presence of healing and compassion. Yet this is never an abstract, shapeless program of action, for even in our service to others in his name he insists we attend oh-so-closely to persons as such, to each and every irreducible “other,” with their own respective contexts, their own transformations, epiphanies, disappointments and victories. Indeed, it is instructive to notice that, in Christ’s story about how we can serve him in serving “the least of these” (Matthew 25:31-46), the “righteous” are surprised at Christ’s retrospective revelation that they cared for him during all those basic activities of feeding, housing, clothing and attending to those in need. So much so that three times they ask, when did we see you?

All this may sound straightforward enough, but I’d say we still get confused. We are often tempted to take leave of the person and the personal, preferring instead to identify with more

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abstract, transcendent “causes,” even ostensibly good ones. For example, and to retrieve the musical intro above, despite being often edified by

contemporary Christian radio, I am often as not alienated by the way so many songs seem deliberately “washed out,” peddling platitudes and generic positivity, as if maximizing popular appeal required leaving the particular behind.

Within the church, too, I get the feeling sometimes that, depending on setting and conversation, there is an expectation to definitively indicate where I land in what can often feel like abstract territory, whether it be on an issue or an ethics question or theological concern. My sense is that one small disclosure will suffice to indicate just what kind of Catholicism I hope to see realized in the world today, at which point the conversation can shift decidedly.

Before concluding this thought, allow me to disclose another of my favorites, this time from the world of theology. In his book, *Truth Is Symphonic*, Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar extends the musical metaphor and explains how we should expect and celebrate Christian pluralism, because such pluralism is a proper expression of the church’s unity-in-diversity — as each individual heart resonates with all its particularity and uniqueness, in concert with others equally performing their own, total response to God.

It is an idealistic image, to be sure, and none should feel so confident as to yet lay claim to “perfect pitch.” Our individual practice of attunement will take a lifetime. In the process, though, Balthasar says one attitude is especially characteristic of a healthy and vibrant “musician,” namely, a reticence, a willingness to give the other freedom to speak/make song and to respond in kind, to not become so absorbed with the singular part we’re playing that we become stultified and closed in on ourselves. The other here is first and foremost the living God, but it undoubtedly includes each other as well as those we are actively serving, those in whom, again, Christ says he will be found hidden.

As a diverse church continues to perform Christ’s ministry in a complicated world, it seems only more incumbent that we practice this reticence: to listen well to the whole orchestra, and to resist collapsing persons and the personal into more generic abstractions.

In playing off this metaphor, Balthasar hardly means to suggest that truth is relative and therefore subjective. No, there is a score; there is a Conductor; we are in fact playing one song. The operative question, especially for ministries like ours, is: what does it sound like? How would listeners — for example our patients and their families, the neighbors we serve — describe our collective voice?

As a diverse church continues to perform Christ’s ministry in a complicated world, it seems only more incumbent that we practice this reticence: to listen well to the whole orchestra, and to resist collapsing persons and the personal into more generic abstractions. Otherwise, symphonic truth runs a two-fold risk: of either being washed out into business as usual, or of devolving into an all-too-familiar version of a more polarized cacophony.

ALEC ARNOLD is a doctoral candidate in health care ethics and theology at Saint Louis University. He is currently the graduate intern in ethics at the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

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