***A Homily for Music Sunday***

*a homily delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 9, 2023*

*based on Psalm 98:1-7*

You all know, I’m sure, that the remarkable human being and lover of Portland, Bill Walton died a couple of weeks ago. He played 604 basketball games at UCLA and in his 14 year N.B.A. career. 604 games. In a 2016 autobiography entitled, *Back From The Dead,* he claimed that he had attended more than 869 concerts by his beloved rock band, the Grateful Dead.

“It wasn’t like he was a fan,” said Mickey Hart one of the drummers for the band, “He was part of our family.”

A Grateful Dead concert was more than a set of songs, Walton once said -- it was “a gathering of the tribe in celebration,” adding, “It’s what I live for

He said those concerts put him in touch with something larger than himself. You know, that’s what music, at its best, does. And, of course, it’s a subjective thing. That’s what I am thinking about on this music Sunday.

I know of no proof for God, however when I hear Bach’s B Mnor Mass, or Mozart’s Requiem, or Mahler’s Second Symphony or the Adagio from his 5th, I think to myself that I cannot imagine that all of this beauty and sublime complexity is merely random, or ultimately meaningless. No, I can’t help but think that it points to something larger, a great sea of beauty out of which it comes; out of which we all come.

You know, Mozart said that he could conceive of an entire concerto in a veritable moment’s time. The movements would just come to him, like an attachment to an email, ready to download. I cannot fathom that, but if Mozart said it, I believe it.

Hearing such a thing, you might believe he was a god, Some people do. The stage play turned into the movie, *Amadeus,* took that idea on, presenting Mozart as a rather vulgar man who wrote heavenly melodies. Who can doubt that Mozart, however vulgar, was in touch with some deep sublime spirit.

Lyanda Haupt has written a book in which she tells a remarkable story. She says that on May 27th, 1784, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart found his muse in a Vienna pet shop. We know the date because Mozart wrote of the event in his journal.

There, on that day, he came across a common European starling, for sale in the shop. It caught his attention because it was singing an improvised version of a principle theme from the third movement of his Piano Concerto no. 17 in G major. Mozart recognized the theme at once but also recognized that the bird had made several interesting changes in the music, changes Mozart found enchanting.

Sensing a kindred spirit, Mozart bought the starling and brought him home to be a family pet. For three years, the starling lived with Mozart, influencing his work and serving as an honored companion, distraction, consolation, and, as I said, muse.

How remarkable. I mean, in America starlings are mostly reviled. Cities and towns pay good money to have them exterminated. A non-native species, they wreak havoc on native bird populations.

But they are crazy smart and they are among the world’s greatest imitators. How interesting that Amadeus found a soul mate in a species of bird considered common and insipid. It’s a little like God choosing a desert hermit like John the Baptist to announce the coming of Christ.

But you know, music is the world’s greatest elevator. It elevates the spirit in every one of us who love it, who cherish it, who let it inform and then transform our hearts. Let me close these short remarks with a true first-person story written by an anonymous woman from San Francisco who, like the great composer’s starling, we might just pass over, but who had a very close, life changing encounter with a work of Wolfgang Mozart’s. See if you can relate.

***WHEN MR. HARVEY,****our high-school music teacher, chose me to play the solo in the orchestra’s performance of Mozart’s Violin Concerto no. 3 in G Major, I felt like I had finally become someone.*

*At the time I had few friends and a sagging load of depression. The concerto became my reason to live. I practiced several hours a day for months, until I’d perfected every note.*

*My beloved violin teacher, Mrs. Van Valkenburgh, did everything she could to prepare me, including showing me how to bow to the audience and to the conductor.*

*On the day of the concert I wore a new dress I’d purchased on a special trip to San Francisco with my mother and sisters. I was excited but mostly scared. I stepped onto the stage, bowed to the blur of faces in the audience, and put my violin to my chin. Mr. Harvey raised his baton, and the orchestra commenced. My notes were perfect, just like I had practiced. I sank into each movement as my fingers did what I had trained them to.*

*Then came the cadenza for the last movement. Mrs. Van Valkenburgh and I had worked on this part repeatedly, and I had often felt the beauty of Mozart’s composition as I’d played it in her studio. The orchestra was silent as I began the solo passage.*

*After several bars something happened. Blankness invaded my mind, turning it into an empty space that housed no notes, no music. My violin transformed into a simple piece of wood. I could not remember what I was supposed to play.*

*I looked at Mr. Harvey pleadingly, and he mouthed words I couldn’t understand. I wanted to bolt from the stage, but something told me to stay put. I closed my eyes and moved my bow along the strings, inventing a line of music. The notes were wrong, but they led me back to the right ones in the final bars of the cadenza, when the orchestra came back in. At the end of the piece the audience applauded, and I walked off the stage.*

*It has been decades since I played the violin. I have fibromyalgia and cannot play even a scale without a flare-up. I am still depressed and still have no friends, job, or partner to bring me joy. When the limitations of my life threaten to overwhelm me, I remember that moment on stage forty years ago when I produced something from the edges of my imagination and pulled myself out of the abyss.*

Amen

Pablo Casals Song of the Birds https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_T8DjwLt\_c4