

Luke 12:13-21
John 18:33-37

A CENTRAL THEME

I don't know as much about music as most of you do, but I was thinking about symphonies the other day. Some of them focus on a simple, core melody. They come at this central theme from many directions and even in many different moods. Sometimes the music seems to wander completely off the theme for a while, but always it comes back. And each time it does, it brings another dimension to the theme. After a while it feels like "coming home" each time the core melody comes back again. In this fashion, the music speaks with increasing power and beauty.

In one sense, such music is immensely complex. It takes many exceedingly well-trained and well-disciplined musicians and many finely tuned instruments to accomplish it. How many hours over how many years does one horn player have to practice with diligence and concentration before he can enhance instead of destroy the symphony? And that kind of discipline and devotion is necessary for every single musician in the orchestra. Yet they all have relatives and endless distractions – bills to pay, sickness to fight – as well as joys, heartaches, dreams, and discouragements. Is a symphony really possible? If anybody thought about it for very long, they would not even try it.

The innuendoes and variations that play in, on, and around the central melody are a staggering array of complex details: notes, measures, time, chords, discords. I cannot imagine how a composer puts such things together. And when one does, it is a miracle that it can ever be played properly. And yet it does happen. A thousand people come to a music hall and are lifted into ecstasy, beauty, peace – even, perhaps, into a transcendent experience. One of my dearest friends in a past parish told me that while he was going through a ten-year drought in his life – an atheist period – music was the only thing he could not reconcile with his atheism. He would go to concerts and the music would reach him and whisper, "You really think there is no God?"

Despite the incredible complexities, it seems to me that a great symphony brings us to simplicity. In language beyond words, it speaks to us of the harmony and unity and mystery of life. The simple melody or theme at the core is lifted from the inane and simplistic, through many levels of confusion and complexity, into simplicity. Simplistic is silly. Simplicity is divine. Simplistic is "poor Johnny one note" – just

keep hitting middle C. Simplicity soars through all the complexities into the unity of all things. Like true meditation, a symphony focuses on a simple melody until it is lifted toward its proper place in the pattern of the Great Designer of all things. Simplistic is willful and self-centered and isolated. Simplicity is peace, humility, and harmony with (the truth of) all things. When someone says “Keep it simple,” do you think they mean “Pretend you have a really low IQ”? There is a huge difference between simplistic and simplicity.

Some people live simplistic lives. They just keep hitting one note: Make money. Make money. Make money. Or: Raise the children. Raise the children. Raise the children. I have known some whose note was: Save the planet. Save the planet. Save the planet. It did not matter what the subject or place or time; if you were with them, that was the only subject there was. No matter how any comment began, you knew where it would end. I know others whose only note is: Are you saved? Are you saved? Are you saved? They never seem to care much about who you are or what your gifts or interests are. It doesn't matter what brings you grief or joy, whom you love, or what God is doing in your life. All they care about is “Are you saved?” All life is boiled down to one simplex, puerile question. When they get to Heaven, they will go through a gate marked YEP. Once inside, that is the only word anybody will get to say throughout all eternity: YEP. (And they are happy about that.)

My own “one note” has been: Renew the church. Renew the church. Renew the church. I never get very far with it, but that doesn't matter to a “poor Johnny one note.” If you have a simplistic side, do you know what your “one note” is?

Other people live complex lives. I do not just mean they encounter many details and embrace many interests. Their lives are scattered. There is no central theme, no core melody. I suppose it is one of the convictions of our time that the way to be well-rounded or whole is to be engaged in as wide an array of activities as possible. Only, being scattered is a practical expression of atheism. There is no God – no real purpose – so we get to go off in all directions without rhyme or discipline (discipleship). It really is not “one note,” but it *is* one note blurred: confusion, chaos, disarray, frenetic. “I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date ...”

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The hymn we just sang often haunts my days.* “Forgive our foolish ways.... And let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace.” The whole hymn reflects a simplicity almost unimaginable in our time. Almost. “*Unless you are born anew, you cannot see the kingdom of God.*” (John 3:3)

Of course, some people do discover a way to live lives of simplicity. Like a symphony, their lives take on many dimensions and variations and endless, complex shades of mood and meaning. Yet always they are searching and expressing and living around one central theme. At times they may seem to wander off to other things but always they return – with new meaning or with more conviction – to the central melody. Like a meditation, they follow one theme through endless variations until it leads them ever nearer to the SOURCE: to God.

Simplicity is neither simplistic nor complicated. But in the vast maze of realities and possibilities, it has chosen a direction – given its allegiance to one goal – like a man who finally chooses one woman. None of the rest are any less beautiful or lovely, but that is no longer relevant. To build a home or to truly love, you have to choose. Remember: “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” (Søren Kierkegaard) Simplicity is the end of idol worship. Yet all the idols are still there. How long has it taken us to learn? We cannot destroy idolatry by destroying idols. Our only hope is to stop worshipping them. (By the way, choosing your God is also the end of *idle* worship.)

It is an old truism that humans are often at their best in times of trial or crisis. That is because a crisis forces us to focus, at least for a while, on some central theme. It moves us into simplicity. The trouble is, the simplicity is induced rather than real. When the crisis passes, often the simplicity goes with it. Sometimes we look back and see that the best times of our lives were in the midst of some crisis. We shake our heads and wonder why. It was the experience of simplicity – the peace of focus. “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*”

Naturally this makes me wonder: What is the central theme of Jesus’ life? Oh, be careful! If you let somebody choose the central theme for you, it will determine how you hear the whole symphony.

*John G. Whittier’s “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.” See the last page of this sermon for the entire hymn.

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Why do you think we have so many denominations – so many different “wings” of Christendom? We read the same Book and we think the same Man is the revelation of God. But we hear the whole thing differently because we cannot agree on the central theme. What are a few of the better-known choices for the central theme of Christianity?

Go to Heaven
Stay out of Hell
Love your neighbor
Have faith
The Bible is absolute truth
Prayer
Evangelize the world
Make the church successful in the world
Obey God

Have I left out your favorite? You still get the point. If we do not hear a central theme, everything is a hodgepodge. Have you ever gone to a symphony and spent a whole evening listening to meaningless, raucous noise? I get so frustrated with the composer – until I realize that it is trying to teach us: Never be like that! Get back to God or your whole life will start sounding like that.

We cannot take God or the church or the Christian Life very seriously if we cannot find a central theme – a core melody. On the other hand, if we think we know the central theme, then everything is comprehended, known, and understood through the lens and spectrum of that central theme.

Why should we be good?

Because if we are, we get to go to Heaven.
Because if we are, it keeps us out of Hell.
Because it helps and does not harm our neighbor.
Because it increases faith on earth.
Because the Bible says so.
Because it matches our guidance in prayer.
Because people will be impressed and want to join us.
Because being good leads to success here.
Because it matches the will of God.

These very different approaches (or motives) can get along fine together most of the time. But they can also disagree violently at any moment

and without warning, often at critical times when we need agreement most of all. You probably don't need an illustration, living in the midst of so many of them all the time. But I will mention one anyway, just in case.

The Council of Churches, Andover, Massachusetts, 1965. (Civil rights days, you may recall.) We needed to make a stronger Christian witness in the community. We wanted to be able to name The Name of Jesus as our reason and purpose, and we wanted to plan, strategize, and carry through on our programs as a united fellowship of committed Christians. Problem: Unitarians and Jews, who do not consider Jesus the Christ or the Son of God, had become part of the Council. While they agreed with most of our approaches to most community problems, they never agreed with evangelizing, and we couldn't call it a "Christian witness" if they were involved. But was it "Christian" to oust sincere and godly people who wanted to be in fellowship with us but did not agree with our creeds? So it blew up in our faces – it tore the Council apart.

The newspapers, of course, had a field day, knowing little or nothing about any of it. The Episcopal priest, who was president of the Council, said that the Council of Churches was, by charter, designed for *Christian* churches – that he had nothing against the Unitarians or Jews and would be happy to collaborate with them in other settings, but the Council of Churches had to be dedicated and obedient to Christ. This reasoned opinion and position from the leadership won the majority vote. There were three influential UCC churches in town; New England is our home territory. But the UCC pastor out on the west side of town said that he often agreed more with the Unitarian minister and the rabbi than he did with the Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Baptists on many creedal points – and why were we pretending a doctrinal unity that did not exist? Moreover, how was it justice to oust those who were already members of the Council, just because now we wanted to claim some new religious purity? So it blew up in our faces. Everybody was sincere, but the purpose – to have a stronger and more effective Christian unity – was in the end greatly harmed and weakened instead of helped.

That is only a foolish illustration from out of the past. Nevertheless, the point is that if we agree, we have to agree not only on the periphery and on shallow terminology but also on the central theme – or the symphony will not be played for very long. We can all say, "Jesus is Lord. I believe in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God." And we may think that means we are united. But if we are not hearing the same central theme, it can blow up in a heartbeat.

What is the central theme for Jesus?

In my view, the motivating, all-pervasive concept of Jesus' mind – and the central theme of His life – is THE ETERNAL KINGDOM OF GOD. All other threads and themes are seen in the light of the Kingdom, measured by the standards of the Kingdom, and evaluated according to their effect, positive or negative, on the Kingdom. THE KINGDOM OF GOD is what Jesus wanted to talk about and be about. For Him, nothing mattered except in the light of the Kingdom. (It's interesting that in our own denomination, there has been a strong move recently to delete the words and concept of "the Kingdom" from Scripture, hymnals, and our whole language. No one wants to admit it, but part of the motive is to get out from under the need to swear allegiance to the King of this Kingdom. Of course, it is seldom put that way. Has Satan stopped being subtle?)

Basileia is Greek for "the Kingdom"; in Hebrew it is *malkut*. It is sovereignty, royal power, dominion. The Kingdom of God is the territory or people over whom God rules. Earth is a scene of universal rebellion. Only where God's kingship is acknowledged – there the Kingdom is. *"Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'"* (Luke 17:20-21)

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) – the biographical material about Jesus, if you will – we find:

Hope is mentioned twice.

Truth is mentioned three times.

Faith is mentioned thirty-one times.

Love is mentioned twenty-seven times.

Satan is mentioned fifteen times.

The Devil is mentioned eleven times

(Satan and Devil together = twenty-six).

The Kingdom is mentioned one hundred and nineteen times.

Heaven is mentioned one hundred and fifteen times

(thirty-two of these are "the Kingdom of Heaven").

If you see THE KINGDOM as Jesus' central theme, great gobs of confusion begin to sort themselves out and come clear. We need to get a little pane of glass and etch "THE KINGDOM OF GOD" in capital letters at the top and then read the entire New Testament through this glass.

Jesus is supposed to be the “Prince of Peace,” yet He caused (and causes) more conflict than any other person who has ever lived. That’s because He did not care about “peace” unless it was the peace of the Kingdom. Jesus, we say, is supposed to be the “Man of Love,” and we all want “love” to be His central theme because we want so badly to be loved ourselves. Yet Jesus never said He was about “love,” and from any normal human perspective, He did and said many very unloving things. That startles us. Jesus did not care about “love” unless it was the love of the Kingdom. And He did not care about being loved by anybody who did not honor and live for the Kingdom.

We keep trying to make secondary themes the primary themes. That is natural – not spiritual, but natural. And then we get blown out of the water because the record doesn’t match what we wanted it to say and thought it was supposed to say. How many times have I heard it? “I don’t like the Bible anymore, now that I’ve started to read it.”

Neighbor “love” is only sometimes exalted. Forgiveness is only sometimes applied. Compassion is only sometimes complimented. Our notions of morality are only sometimes recommended. Jesus appears to be a mass of contradictions, and the more we study, the more confusing it gets. Until we begin to see that THE KINGDOM OF GOD is the central theme of Jesus’ life. We keep trying to assume it is something else, so we keep trying to make it all spin around the wrong focal point. The Kingdom of God *is not* the central theme of *our* lives – at least it never is to begin with. “*Seek God’s Kingdom first*” is always a startling teaching. It never fails to bring us up short. Insofar as we fail to realize that THE KINGDOM is Jesus’ central theme, it makes it terribly difficult for us to comprehend how or why Jesus says and does any of the things He says and does. Once the Kingdom is seen as the central theme, Jesus suddenly becomes amazingly and dynamically consistent. Everything starts to add up. Every passage, choice, encounter, deed, story, teaching, and incident starts to fit into place when we remember that Jesus is here for and about THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

A man said to Jesus, “Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me.” But let’s not rush to Jesus’ reply. How do *you* perceive life? Apparently a brother has been defrauded. Either that or a brother is being falsely accused. What is the important thing? Well, the important thing is to find out what the facts really are and then see to it that justice is done. Ask any social-action group or committee in the world. It is the task of the Christian church and of every Christian to defend and help

the oppressed and to strive for justice. We all know that. That is what our Lord would want us to do. But if that's the case, then why doesn't HE do it?

How can we understand Jesus' reply? I confess that I have a hard time understanding, but it does seem that Jesus actually scolds the man for caring about his inheritance. And the parable Jesus tells is a doozy. We should not care about treasures on earth, but should worry about being rich toward God? What kind of double-talk is that?! Surely there is no hope of understanding here – unless we start reading in the light of God's Eternal Kingdom. Jesus wants for this man a greater inheritance than anything the man himself has ever thought about. So Jesus will not be sidetracked by minor and irrelevant incidentals. Of course, they do not seem minor or irrelevant to this man – or to me, or maybe even to some of you. But that's the point, isn't it? Oh yes, in this funny, new kind of light, Jesus *does* try to free the oppressed man, only not from the oppression the man had in mind or in the way the man had expected – or in the way I would expect or want, *at least not at first*.

Many object to the “otherworldliness” of Christianity, insisting that this emphasis has made the church a place for escapists and “do-nothing” artists. They point out, and rightly so, that Jesus was always and everywhere engaged with people and their real problems. Yes, but always, as we just noticed, from the perspective of the Kingdom. If a man was starving and you had food, you were to share your food. But let me suggest, however heretical it may sound, that Jesus was not really worried about the fact that a man might starve. Do you remember forty days in the wilderness without food? Or “*Man does not live by bread alone.*” Can you threaten, bribe, or control Jesus with a thing like starvation? Satan tried it and got nowhere! No, Jesus was worried about *the soul* of a man who would not share with his brother. That does not fit the Kingdom! Jesus' mission was to bring reconciliation with God to the people of the earth, that they might become citizens of an Eternal Kingdom. If this reconciliation with God brought certain improvements here on earth – as it sometimes does – that is wonderful. It is nevertheless a side issue – a secondary and temporary benefit. The goal is the Kingdom of Heaven!

They brought Jesus before Pilate on the grounds that He was some kind of a threat to the Roman government. Men who did not believe in Heaven could not help but misconstrue and misunderstand Jesus' purpose in this way. He spoke of a Kingdom, of followers, of a new age coming. What were they to think *except* that He was plotting rebellion? Everybody else who spoke of such things was indeed plotting revolution.

How were they to distinguish, if they could not grasp the reality of the Kingdom of God?

Jesus and Pilate faced each other. The two were worlds apart; many dimensions separated the way they looked at everything. Pilate was a ruler on earth; Jesus claimed “*My kingdom is not of this world.*” Pilate could not understand Him; he had never thought in terms of anything beyond this world, at least not very seriously.

Jesus staked no claims here. He coveted no share of earthly kingdoms for Himself or anyone else. Even the Pharisees, who hotly claimed to believe in Heaven, could in no way believe that Jesus was taking it so seriously. Jesus was put to death because the people around Him would not or could not believe that He really meant what He said. They did not take God’s Kingdom that seriously, so they could not believe that Jesus was so earnest about it. Instead of believing the Good News He proclaimed, they read their own motives into His words and actions and concluded that He was really competing for the power and the rewards of this earth that they themselves wanted so badly – and that He did not covet in the least.

In China there is a legend of a great bird. It is called *yuan-ch’u*. The *yuan-ch’u* starts from the southern ocean and flies to the northern sea. During its entire journey, *yuan-ch’u* perches in no tree save the sacred Wo-tung; it eats no fruit save that of the Persian Lilac; it drinks only at the Magic Well. Now it happened that a flea-bitten old owl that had gotten ahold of the rotting carcass of a rat looked up one day as the *yuan-ch’u* flew high overhead. Terrified lest the *yuan-ch’u* should swoop down and steal its tiny, wretched morsel, it screamed, “Shoo! Shoo *Yuan-ch’u!*” Just so do we shoo Jesus away from our precious possessions here on earth, and even from our own lives.

As long as there are Christians in the world, some will work for world peace; some will work for equality between peoples and races; some will raise children; some will labor against poverty; some will be healers; some will seek to raise the standard of living. But none of them will do it for the reasons or purposes that this world honors. The Kingdom of Heaven takes both the terror and the utopianism out of the picture for Christians.

Jesus measured everything by the yardstick of God’s Eternal Kingdom. To us He seems like a man who did not belong here. That is because He belonged in a Kingdom where we are still strangers.

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And He beckons us to leave our sense of belonging here – our trying to be “at home” here – and to give up or sit very, very lightly to *any* inheritance we may have found here.

We are given free will. We get to choose our King. Where the King is known, claimed, and obeyed, there is the Kingdom. It is the central theme of Jesus’ life. It is the symphony the Christian Life is playing.

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow Thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee,
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call,
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

– John G. Whittier