

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
The Rev. Ian Burch  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI  
July 27, 2019

Some of you might know, but most of you probably don't, that my childhood was in large part about music. I'm the child of two music teachers, and both my older sister and older brother began studying violin and piano at age five. There were music students in my home nearly every week of my life, and for years, I had lessons before school started in the morning. I did piano guild competitions and every kind of violin recital and special orchestra that was possible to do. I can't think of one single day of my life before the age of 25 when music didn't come up in one way or another.

For all of that, though, I was a bit of an indifferent student. I had some natural advantages having had music poured into me from birth, but when it came right down to it, I didn't have the internal drive and discipline to be great. My dad always said that you can master the violin with 10,000 hours of practice, and I just never thought that seemed like a good deal. Still, I played well enough to sit in the back of some good orchestras, even as I found my calling elsewhere.

In graduate school, I played in the University of Chicago Symphony, and when I was crippled by student loan debt, I taught young violin students in the evenings and on Sundays after my shift as a chaplain was over. I even played in a few community orchestras and one community opera to make a few bucks, and I was grateful for the revenue, even if I still wasn't winning any awards with my technique or dedication to practice.

All that changed while I was playing in the pit of an opera in Oak Park, Illinois — Mozart's *Così fan Tutti*, for you opera buffs. It was a short run — three performances — and I think they paid me about \$75 bucks a night. I was in the second violin section taking bowing notes from the concertmaster and, for those of you who don't know, that means that he was extremely good, and I was just kind of okay. Something kind of came up in me, and I got it in my head that I wanted to take some lessons. I hadn't studied since college, and I was surprised that I wanted to. I asked the concertmaster — Dr. Neel — if he'd be willing to take me on, and he said that he'd be glad to, and he even worked with my budget. Before you knew it, I was back in the studio working on scales, etudes, technique, and a big Kabalevsky violin concerto that seemed to have more black dots than white spaces on the page.

Something strange happened to me over that year with Dr. Neel. I began to take my practice seriously. I started to grow as a musician and to be diligent in my work with scales in a way I never had before. I found myself deeply immersed in the process of learning and of music. And it paid off; I noticed a marked difference in my playing. I think I actually started to make some music, in spite of twenty years of kind of dialing it in as a violinist. I'm grateful to Dr. Neel, and for a while I thought maybe he was a great teacher. And maybe he was, but I think I always had great music teachers. Something had shifted in me that made me ready to submit myself to the process of learning music.

And that is, I'm pretty sure, where the disciples are this morning. They turn to Jesus and say, "teach us to pray." Which is silly, in a way. They are all good Jewish people who know the great stories of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the rites and rituals of the Jerusalem Temple. They know about Noah and Abraham, Sarah, and Rachel, and Ruth. Why would deeply religious folks turn to Jesus and ask for a lesson on prayer?

Well, prayer, like music, is for life. It's not something that is learned once and done. It is a lifelong conversation with God, as we are learning at our spirituality classes here on Thursday nights. One of the definitions that we learned for prayer last week was "the soul ascending to God." In other words, the disciples were hungry to be closer to God and were ready to listen to Jesus in a special way.

And he gives them a prayer that we still use today. He tells them to pray to a holy God, to ask that our will be God's will, that heaven and earth be close enough to touch, to provide for the feeding of the whole world, to be forgiven of sin in the same way we forgive the sins of others, and to deliver us from all evil. It's a lot of prayer in a few simple lines. But it strikes me that the disciples were ready in that moment for the right teacher to give them something they could use until their dying day.

So where does this leave us, the modern-day disciples? What happens if we're not quite ready to ask Jesus to teach us to pray. I think that is just fine. As far as I can tell, everyone is on this spiritual voyage in their own way and at their own pace. We share the bread, the wine, and the great hymns of the church together, but there is a part of our spiritual quest for God that is singular, unique, and individual. I used to think that I came to my violin teacher really late in my life — so many of my peers had figured out some of the big lessons in college. But the thing is, I came to the right teacher, at the right time, for the right reasons. And when we are in a place to receive the blessings of God — and prayer is certainly one of those blessings — it will be there for us. So fear not. God is not done seeking us out. Even if we don't have time to practice. Even if the timing is not quite right. Even if we're not following Jesus the way we'd like. And even if we screech a little from the back of the orchestra. God will use us, even if we're indifferent students. And Jesus is ready to teach when we're ready to learn. Amen.