

Moments of Inspiration: Preaching, Jazz Improvisation, and the Work of the Spirit

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One of the most mysterious moments in preaching is that moment in the process of sermon preparation when the “light goes on” and the preacher makes the turn from text to sermon. It is the “that-will-preach” moment when the sermon forms and, at times, even takes off and runs by itself. Ask even the most experienced and eloquent preachers about that moment and most will be at a loss for words to describe how it happens. A professor of preaching once asked Gardner Taylor how he moved from text to sermon. Taylor replied, “I just move along in the text and something happens.” Few preachers would give a better response. Similarly, ask homiletics professors about that moment, and they will probably confess that there is no way to teach it; there are no ABC techniques to “make it happen.” Ultimately, standing in that mysterious space between text and sermon, most preachers and homileticians are left humbly to confess, “it’s the work of the Spirit.”

This mysterious space between “text” and “sermon” is also the peculiar province of the jazz musician.¹ In a jazz piece, the musician ordinarily begins by playing through the “text”—or at least by signaling what the “text” is for those who have ears to hear. Then the artist interprets the “text” improvisationally. Sometimes the interpretation is an improvisation on the theme or melody of the “text.” At other times the improvisation is more radical, developing the chord structure into entirely new themes or melodies. Whatever shape the improvisation takes, however, it is spontaneous, in the moment. Jazz, in short, lives in that mysterious space where “text” becomes “sermon,” where the language of the “text” is taken in creative, innovative directions to speak to a particular audience. And when a jazz improvisation comes together, one is left speechless before the mystery of inspiration, as the following account of a Charlie Parker performance suggests:

[Parker made] an unscheduled appearance; he just dropped in and played. The waiter did not even bother to ask for. . . orders. We were all witnessing a miracle that was happening and that happens over and over again in jazz all over the country—beauty being created on the spot, creativity lost on the air but leaving its imprint on the brains and visceras of its listeners.²

While respecting the mystery of inspiration, however, jazz musicians are not naive about improvisation. They are well aware that the improvisational performance is the tip of a very large iceberg. One doesn’t just pick up a horn, claim one’s own “voice,” and begin improvising, as young musicians often painfully discover:

When Lonnie Hillyer was a young teenager, he imagined that if he could only muster the courage to join a renowned musician on the bandstand, inspiration would carry him through the event. Pursuing his family’s acquaintanceship with Miles Davis, Hillyer obtained an invitation to sit in

with Davis's band. He laughs ruefully as he recalls losing his place after the first eight bars and how brutally thereafter each pitch of his impassioned performance clashed with the band. When the dismal solo finally aborted, Davis pulled him off the stage and grumbled hoarsely, "You don't know your chords, do you?" When Hillyer confessed to this, Davis told him not to return to the club until he had mastered harmony.³

Successful jazz musicians know that they do not create expressive and evocative solos by accident or luck, even though the moments of inspiration are elusive and unpredictable. Inspired improvisations, though genuinely created on the spot, are paradoxically the products of the jazz musician's discipline and her knowledge of music theory, instrumental technique, and the jazz tradition. Good jazz musicians spend their entire working lives practicing their instruments and studying music theory. Even well-established stylists continue to work hard at the technical aspects of their art. No self-respecting musician considers herself to be fully developed, a finished product. This attitude drives good musicians to become even better, to learn more and more about their instruments and music. Such discipline ultimately allows musicians to play freely, to express themselves with little or no thought given to the mechanics of a musical instrument at the moment of inspiration.⁴

As Eric Nisenon has summarized this aspect of jazz,

Jazz improvisation. . . is based on a paradox—that a musician comes to a bandstand so well prepared that he can fly free through instinct and soul and sheer musical bravery into the musical unknown. . . .

You cannot understand John Coltrane's music unless you comprehend that the ideas he worked out came from his knowledge, memory, and musical curiosity as well as from the spontaneity of improvisation. Coltrane practiced constantly, working out on his horn and on the piano ideas that he would turn into music when playing before an audience or if he was recording. Picture a jazz musician walking on the stand, knowing exactly what he is after musically, but having no idea what he will play until the notes come out of his instrument, and you can perceive the paradox that is at the heart of jazz.⁵

In exploring that mysterious moment between text and sermon in preaching, preachers can learn something from the jazz tradition. Jazz musicians remind preachers of the critical work of the Spirit that takes place *before* the moments of inspiration actually happen. What is important is not that we analyze or understand what actually takes place in those moments. What is critical is that we attend to the traditions and practices through which the Spirit prepares the preacher at a very deep level for those moments to take place. Indeed, if preachers today were as grounded as jazz musicians in these "background" traditions and practices, the sermon itself might become as spontaneous a form of improvisation as the jazz solo.

A People

For all their creativity and innovation, jazz musicians are deeply grounded in a tradition. At the broadest level, they are rooted in the story of the African American

people. Jazz is a unique art form of the African American community, a gift from African Americans to the world.⁶ Contrary to popular myth, it did not arise *ex nihilo* in New Orleans a century ago. Rather, jazz is the continuation of African American musical self-expression that began with the cries of the first twenty enslaved West Africans who were deposited at Jamestown in 1619. A line of musical expression can be traced from early field hollers through slave songs, spirituals, folk, minstrelsy, work songs, the blues, ragtime, and the various twentieth-century forms of jazz.⁷ All these identifiable styles of musical expression had the unique African American experience in common, and each perpetuated the oral tradition of African societies. Today's jazz musician is connected to the African American community of the past through its history and continues to tell its story through his instrument. The sorrows and the joys, the tragedies and the triumphs, the blues and the praise shouts of nearly four centuries of the African American people reverberate in every note played by the jazz musician who knows the history of the music and the culture whose story it tells.⁸

As Mtumishi St. Julien puts it,

Our music is us because it comes from our souls—it IS soul. It is what we ARE communicated through sound. We are a people who have sought freedom—jazz expresses that freedom. A people who seek to share—jazz expresses that sharing. A people who urgently wish to live more fully—and our music offers an urgency to live fully. Most importantly, we are a people who, even through suffering, have learned to love. Our music is an expression of that love—a love for God, His universe, and His people.⁹

Through baptism, preachers also become part of a distinctive people with a long and peculiar story. Baptismal prayers, which recount God's work from creation through the Exodus, Jesus, and Pentecost, set the context for baptism; the person being baptized receives a new identity by becoming part of a peculiar people with a unique memory.¹⁰ In the worship of the church and the reading of scripture, this memory is nurtured, and contemporary believers claim the story of God's people as their own. As Deuteronomy 26: 5-11, an important liturgical piece, makes clear, through the community's worship and scripture the story of God's people becomes a living memory in which *we* are participants. In Christian worship the Eucharist, in particular, transforms remembering into *anamnesis*, in which the events of the past become living, present realities and the contemporary church becomes part of the ongoing life of God's people.

The work of the Spirit in this story and this people provides the larger context for the Spirit's work in that mysterious space between text and sermon, just as the story of a people has inspired jazz musicians through the years. Central to the preacher's calling is an ongoing immersion in the scripture and worship of the church, which nurture the preacher in the story of God's people. Through such immersion this story comes to live deep within the preacher and shapes the way she sees and lives in the world. The preacher's memories and joys and pains extend beyond herself and beyond the present moment back through the centuries—back to the cries of slaves in Egypt and the ecstasy of the church at Pentecost. The sermon becomes a new expression of *our* soul and *our* love for God.

Within this context, the move from text to sermon is not just an isolated,

miraculous moment, but an extension of the Spirit's work through the ages. There is no longer a need to try to explain the space between text and sermon or to reduce it to some formula or technique. Even less is there a need to control or manage that space. Rather, when the preacher enters that space grounded in the story of God's people, the sermon can emerge from the depths of that story like the rich and passionate improvisation of the jazz musician. Like Gardner Taylor, the preacher can move along in the text, trusting that something will happen.

A Language

Jazz musicians tell the story of a people by playing in a language recognized by the people, a language that itself develops as the culture evolves. Jazz has always been in touch with the times, reflecting and directing the personal, social, spiritual, and political evolution of the people. In different contexts, jazz soothes, jazz incites, jazz puts people at peace with themselves and others, jazz moves people to action. The improvisational language of jazz speaks powerfully to the culture that recognizes the music as its own.¹¹

Jazz musicians learn how to speak this language not only by practicing instrumental techniques and learning the history of the culture, but by imitating the great jazz performers of all generations. Such imitation empowers jazz players to learn successful speech patterns upon which they can build their own way of playing. In this manner individual styles are developed that nevertheless can be understood by the audience, allowing each musician to communicate effectively with her own voice.¹²

Clayton, for example, began a career as a working jazz drummer more than two decades ago. From the beginning he attended diligently to his drumming technique, musical knowledge, and cultural understanding. But no matter how hard he worked at developing his own style—his own voice—he failed until he discovered Art Blakey. After hearing Blakey, he acquired every available recording by this master drummer (more than 70) and spent countless hours listening attentively to Blakey on a daily basis. Within a year, he found he could anticipate Blakey's every move on never-before-heard recordings. And, most important, he discovered that he was unconsciously imitating him when he performed—and his Blakey imitation was far more expressive than his own floundering efforts. Through his imitation of Blakey, Clayton got the music out of his head and into his soul. From his Blakey foundation, he became free to find his own unique voice. He became capable of expressing himself through the drums in a language derived from and understood by the jazz culture.

As a distinctive culture, the Christian religion likewise not only has a peculiar speech, but a long tradition of performing that speech through preaching. Indeed, preaching itself is a form of linguistic improvisation. Like a jazz musician improvising on the theme or the chord structure of a "text" of music, the faithful preacher improvises each week on the peculiar language of the church, taking it in innovative directions for ever new situations and contexts. Learning this peculiar Christian speech, which is paradigmatically encoded in the text of scripture and creatively developed in the theological and homiletical traditions, is an essential discipline for the preacher, which prepares her to enter that mysterious space between text and sermon.

Unfortunately, however, in the quest to find their own "voices" many preachers today, like Lonnie Hillyer who tried to play with Miles Davis, fail to take the time either to learn the church's peculiar language or to immerse themselves in the homiletical

tradition. Rather than mastering the themes and “chords” of scripture—the dominant plots and deep structures of the biblical story—many preachers are content to skim the surface, scurrying each week from text to text. All too often the texts remain external, in the preacher’s head, rather than forming in his soul. Preaching becomes a plodding, self-conscious chore rather than a free and unselfconscious expression of the Word.

Even more strikingly, there is today often little appreciation for the homiletical tradition of which we are a part. There is little knowledge of or regard for the men and (even less) the women of generations past who were immersed in the Christian language and became masters of phrasing and transitions and images and stories. Unlike jazz musicians, who spend hours and hours learning classic improvisations and memorizing set pieces, preachers often view such imitation in negative terms; individual creativity is emphasized with little understanding of the soil out of which it grows. Jazz musicians, however, suggest that preachers have much to learn by imitating great sermons of former preachers, by mastering the uses of scripture, the colorful speech, and the illustrative moves of our ancestors in the pulpit. Jazz musicians remind preachers that our own “voices,” our own distinctive ways of “going on” with the language of faith, are nurtured and empowered by our engagement with the preaching of the past.¹³

Not surprisingly, the African American preaching tradition, which is closely related to the jazz tradition, has understood this fact much better than the more individualistic mainline Protestant churches. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, learned to preach by imitating the great preachers in his homiletical traditions (both liberal and African American). Like a jazz musician, King gleaned countless set pieces from the tradition and used them improvisationally in his sermons, always giving them his own special twist. Through his immersion in the language of scripture and the tradition of preaching, King was able to “go on” with the language in creative and innovative ways in various contexts; he developed his own powerful and distinctive “voice” as a preacher.¹⁴ On this point King, the African American preaching tradition, and jazz musicians have something to teach us all.

A Life

Grounded in the story of a people and the language of a tradition, jazz musicians know, finally, that the life of the musician shapes the music he plays in profound ways. The often repeated maxim of Charlie Parker, “if you don’t live it, it can’t come out your horn,” gives primal expression to this intimate relationship between life and music. John Coltrane has expressed this connection more fully in relation to his particular music:

My goal is to live the truly religious life, and express it through my music. If you live it, when you play there’s no problem because the music is part of the whole thing. To be a musician is really something. It goes very, very deep. My music is the spiritual expression of what I am, my faith, my knowledge, my being.¹⁵

Consider the implications of a paraphrase of Coltrane’s comment for Christian preachers:

My goal is to live the truly Christian life, and express it through my preaching. If you live it, when you preach there's no problem because the sermon is part of the whole thing. To be a preacher is really something. It goes very, very deep. My preaching is the spiritual expression of what I am, my faith, my knowledge, my being.

To be a preacher does indeed go very, very deep. Preaching the Word and living the Word are inseparably related. Jesus first calls the disciples to follow him; only later does he send them out to preach. Indeed, it is only through following Jesus that the disciples can know what to proclaim.

At this point the jazz tradition invites homiletics and preachers to recover yet another dimension of preaching that all too often gets lost in the reliance on shallow homiletical methods and techniques. The mysterious moment when text becomes sermon is shaped not only by the story of a people and the language of a tradition, but also by the passion and convictions of the preacher, which are formed along the way of discipleship. When the "well goes dry" and inspiration is missing, what may be required is not more homiletics books or lectionary aids, but rather more faithful discipleship. What may be needed is for preaching to become not one more task amidst the busy work of professional ministry, but rather "part of the whole thing," the expression of a life lived in the way of Jesus. For such a life, Coltrane reminds us, brings preachers most fully to those moments of inspiration when sermons are born.

Notes

¹ No one can write about jazz and preaching without expressing a word of gratitude to Eugene Lowry, homiletics and jazz pianist, who has done much to capture the connections between these two arts. See, in particular, Eugene L. Lowry, "The Narrative Quality of Experience as a Bridge to Preaching," in *Journeys Toward Narrative Preaching*, ed. Wayne Bradley Robinson (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1990), 67-77, "The Jazz Homiletic," *Preaching Today* Audiotape No. 115 (Carol Stream, Illinois: Christianity Today and Leadership), and *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997).

² Robert Reisner, *Bird: The Legend of Charlie Parker* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1962), 14.

³ Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 71.

⁴ Ample evidence can be found concerning the musical discipline of jazz masters. See, for example, the work by Reisner. See also Eric Nisenson, *Ascension: John Coltrane and His Quest* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), and Joseph Levy, *The Jazz Experience: A Guide to Appreciation* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1983), 25-26.

⁵ Nisenson, 53.

⁶ Archie Shepp, cited in Frank Kofsky, *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 9.

⁷ This idea is given passionate voice in LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963).

⁸ See Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981). This book is the definitive statement on the reflection and continuation of African oral culture in historic and contemporary African American musical expression.

⁹ Mtumishi St. Julien, "From the Heart: A Reflection on the Essence of Jazz," *Black Sacred Music* 6 (Spring 1992): 168.

¹⁰ See the "Prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water" in Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) *Book of Common Worship*, 410-11.

¹¹ Gerhard Putschogl, "Black Music—Key Force in Afro-American Culture: Archie Shepp on Oral Tradition and Black Culture," in *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1984), 262-72.