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*Matthew 16:21-23*

*From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’*

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This is a fermata. It is a simple musical notation which indicates that the note upon which it rests is to be held for longer than its typical length. The name comes from the Italian “fermare” which means “to stop.” Such lengthening is done at the discretion of the musician or conductor. A well-placed fermata can add much needed flavor to a melody; think of it like that essential pinch of salt, without which an otherwise tasty dish can turn bland.

Sometimes, a fermata can bring bring a musical phrase to a natural conclusion, allowing the brain for a needed pause before absorbing the next musical movement. Other times, a fermata holds a chord that wants to be resolved to another (think about when we sing “Amen” at the end of the doxology). Still other times, fermatas lend themselves to making theological statements, such as when we sing “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?” Together we sing, “Ooooooo, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, trem-buhllllllllllll.” That fermata forces us to inhabit that space of lament before taking a deep breath to finish the phrase with “were you there when they nailed him to a tree?”

That being said, even properly-placed fermatas need to be *interpreted* correctly. I remember when I was drum major of my high school marching band and I was given the creative freedom to hold a particularly well-known fermata in the Star Spangled Banner. “O the land of the FREEEEEEEEEEEEE…”. However, I once held that high note obnoxiously long and some of my bandmates never forgave me for it (once they regained consciousness, that is). But I had learned my lesson. I learned then and there the importance of a well-placed, and well-*practiced* fermata.

But if a well-placed fermata can perfect a melody, a misplaced one can just as easily ruin it. A misplaced fermata can bring a song to its knees, forcing us to get hung up on a certain portion of the melody that was never intended to be the focal point. We do this sometimes without even knowing it. We do this with even the best of intentions. Sometimes, you and I, the imperfect, beautiful human beings that we are, get stuck. Sometimes, we get fixed upon one chord that’s supposed to lead us to another. Sometimes, we misplace our fermatas.

Last week, Peter got his fermata right! Who do *you* say that I am? Jesus asked. You, Peter responded, are the son of the Living God, the Messiah. But this week, Peter’s fermata gets misplaced.

I suppose we shouldn’t be too hard on him; after all, we are him, and he is us. Isn’t it natural to want to avoid suffering? Don’t you and I have a right to desire success? To expect safety, comfort, and consolation in our faith journey? Who in their right mind *wouldn’t* react as Peter did to the news that someone you love is going to die a torturous, humiliating public execution?

Peter’s disorientation is understandable. He, like us, is trying to absorb the water-hose-to-the-face approach of Jesus in these last few verses. Just a few minutes ago, Jesus asked a simple question and Peter gave a simple, and correct, answer. And *then* Jesus starts spouting on about keys to the kingdom of heaven, and bounding things and loosing things, something about him being a rock of some sort, and now about suffering and death? Hold on there, Jesus! My fermata is stuck a couple measures behind. Can’t we rewind?

But Jesus knows that “rewinding” is far too great a temptation for him to flirt with without being crystal clear about who he is and who God is calling him to be. As such, he tells Peter to change the placement of his fermata on divine things instead of human things. Now, here we must be careful not to set up too much of a false dichotomy with “divine” being “good” and “human” being “bad.” Jesus is, after all, equally *both* of those things!

Therefore, I take Jesus’ harsh rebuke to be a much-needed reminder that we get hung up on things that cloud our focus. Like Peter, we want achieve success and avoid pain. We’ve been groomed to think that influence and size is the mark of a congregation’s faithfulness. We’ve been seduced into measuring our *current* fidelity in contrast to our *past* selves. Like Peter, our fermata is stuck on a portion of the tune that was finished decades ago.

And, neighbors, I get it. We’ve been through the ringer. Partisan conflict, a global pandemic, and a cataclysmic cultural shift in mainline Christianity would knock the wind out of any congregation. It’s natural, amid all that change, to place our fermatas over familiar chords of past melodies instead of discovering what newness lies in verses to come.

We get caught up in the “good old days” when the pews were full, we had more staff and volunteers, and things just seemed…easier. That’s a misplaced fermata.

We lament that our children and our grandchildren have become disillusioned with the way we do church. We grieve that young people aren’t around like they used to be. Instead of being curious of how *we* can come to *them*, we resent the fact that *they* aren’t coming to *us.* That’s a misplaced fermata.

We allow a particular ministry of the church to become a sacred cow; and we sacrifice to it endlessly to preserve the nostalgic memory of the church’s past instead of investing resources in its future. That’s a misplaced fermata.

But there’s good news…*really* good news: fermatas are *not* immovable objects. They don’t have to hijack the melody.

As a parent of two toddlers, my life is now marked and measured in children’s movies. Hazel Grace and Winnie have gone through various “eras.” First was their Frozen Era. Then they moved on to their Moana Era and then their Encanto Era.

Now, we’ve moved onto their Sing Era. The original Sing movie came out in 2016 and it’s sequel, Sing 2, came out in 2021. It’s about a band of anthropomorphic animals who come together to put on a singing production. It’s a jukebox musical so the benefit is that the songs vary from Taylor Swift to Elton John, Billy Eilish to Stevie Wonder. In Sing 2, the bulk of the narrative involves the characters doing their best to recruit the talent of retired rock star, Clay Calloway.

As it turns out, Clay Calloway is a tortured character who has retired from professional music as an act of lament over the death of his beloved wife, Ruby. The weight of his grief has caused music to lose its luster. He’s become a recluse, forbidding himself from ever picking up a guitar or singing again. He’s stuck in a fermata, one hovering over a particularly sad chord. On the front porch of his house out in the middle of nowhere, a punk rock porcupine named Ash strums her guitar and sings that beloved U2 Song:

*You’ve got to get yourself together;*

*You’ve got stuck in a moment*

*and now you can’t get out of it…*

It’s a fitting metaphor, especially because Clay Calloway is voiced by none other than Bono himself. The man is stuck in a moment, held hostage by a fermata gone rogue.

Without giving away too many spoilers, suffice it to say that the main characters are successful in cajoling Calloway out of his self-imposed retirement. They do so by working together as a family to remind him that fermatas are never meant to be endless, and that they can be moved if we work to move them together.

Y’all, fermatas are heavy things. Peter got stuck and Jesus knew that if he wasn’t careful that he might be stuck as well. “Get behind me, Satan” are the words of a man who knows that he can’t afford to get stuck on a particular fermata that plays the game by Rome’s rules instead of the rules of the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter got stuck, like we all do, and Jesus reminded him that this movement is really about one thing: death and resurrection.

But too often, friends, we keep the fermata here [*over death*], when it really belongs here [*over resurrection*].

As our hearts wander this Lenten journey, remember that our work is in moving fermatas. To our neighbors who know what it’s like to have the fermata of homelessness hover above them, the Church must band together and say, “we can move that fermata together.”

To our neighbors who know what it’s like to have the fermata of homophobia and transphobia hover above them, the Church must band together and say, “we can move that fermata together.”

To our neighbors who know what it’s like to have the fermata of mass shootings hover above them, the Church must band together and say, “we *can* move that fermata together.”

To our neighbors who know what it’s like to have the fermata of losing friends and families to political divisions, the Church must band together and say, “we *can* move that fermata together.”

And to *ourselves* who know what it’s like to “get stuck in a moment” anywhere in our lives that keeps us from moving forward to a healthier and happier place, the Church must be a place where the grace of God is shared and proclaimed, and together we say, “**we can move that fermata together.**”

So friends, hear the Good News of the Gospel: the symphony isn’t over. No fermata is endless except the one that hovers over Christ’s resurrection.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**