"Creating *Within* the Box"

A homily delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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After traveling Europe as a child prodigy, Mozart wanted to be better situated than the "backwater" of *Salzburg* where he had been born. So, at 21, he set out, accompanied by his mother, to look for work in Germany or France. Along the way, his mother would die in Paris and he would not find a suitable position. And so back he went to Salzburg in early 1779. Still a young man of 23, Mozart found himself back in the city of his birth.

I imagine Mozart returning to Salzburg feeling defeated. Having left two years earlier with his mother, he returns alone . . . his mother buried hundreds of miles away less than a year earlier. He returns to his father, his sister, and to the cathedral where he had worked before. A man whose star had burned so brightly as a child now seems to be tucked away into a dim corner.

In Salzburg, he is handed an assignment to write a celebratory Mass for Easter. Now clearly Mozart loved to compose. His prodigiousness suggests as much. Yet, this particular assignment may have given him pause. As I understand it, there are two forms of the Mass—one longer and one shorter. The longer version included more elements and instruments, as well as a formality to mark important occasions. The longer form, of course, also practically meant a longer amount of time in the worship service.

Apparently the Archbishop in Salzburg, Mozart's employer, did not like the length of the formal mass, but he did want all of the elements of the longer service as well as the celebratory tone. And so, Mozart's challenge was to create a composition full of celebratory formality, but to do so in less than 45 minutes. In fact, the piece Mozart composed that Easter—and that we'll hear today—lasts less than 30 minutes.

I love this story because it is a creative example of how one might respond to being boxed in. We often associate creativity with a kind of "thinking outside the box" of convention. But sometimes we *are* "boxed in" by the limits of our time, our resources, or our context. Sometimes we have to figure out how to move and respond within the parameters that are given to us—even if they are not ideal, even if they are not of our own making.

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One example from pop culture of this kind of resourceful thinking is the 1980's television character MacGyver. Even if you've never seen the show, I suspect you may have heard the name—as in "he's a real MacGyver." In the television show, MacGyver was a secret agent who would find himself stuck in all kinds of situations. But, he would then build something from the everyday objects around him that would enable him to escape. Often, there would be duct tape involved.

I see Mozart as a kind of musical MacGyver. Locked within the parameters of the long mass with all of its elements, he scanned the available pieces of text and instruments, then assembled a masterful piece of music. He even managing to "escape" long before the 45 minute deadline exploded.

Sometimes creativity, even genius, happens *within* a box. Consider the sonnets of Shakespeare or Milton, which evoke grand stories and emotions within 14 lines of iambic pentameter. Or, consider the even more restrained form of the haiku poem—only 17 syllables split into three lines. Sometimes the limits of a box become a platform for creative insight.

There are times when we need to think beyond the boundaries of convention and tradition. And there are times when we need to critique or leave behind boxes that unjustly or even violently confine the thoughts, spirits, and lives of people. And sometimes, we need to accept the parameters of the box we've been given and learn to live creatively and meaningfully within the limits of a particular situation.

Being limited in some ways does not mean that there are not still possibilities or room for creativity. Faced with limited options, we may need to connect with our own inner Shakespeare, MacGyver, or Mozart to help us reimagine what *is* possible. Or, if we're feeling a bit boxed in on our own, we can reach out to others to help us reimagine what might be possible within the parameters before us.

Whether we find these possibilities within ourselves or with the help of others, may we all find ways to live creatively *within* the box when we need to.

So may it be. Amen.

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