

“Even the Birds Listen”

A homily by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

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Can you recall your earliest memory of music? Honestly, I cannot. I cannot remember my first breath, my first laugh, my first word, or the first time I heard music. Like breath, eating, or sleeping. Music has simply always been there.

Was there a time when music didn't exist? Was music *invented*? We know that music has long been a part of human history and cultures. There are, in fact, music archaeologists who reach through time to find the remnants of music in the material records of humanity.

Yet, is music the sole domain of human culture? What of birdsong or the humming of whales? Is the rhythmic crashing of waves upon a shore music? Indeed, sounds fill our world. There are crickets chirping and wind blowing in the leaves of trees. Squirrels scurry on the forest floor. Hawks shriek in the sky. A moment of silence follows a flash of light, then the thunderclap.

Even the deaf can feel rhythms.

We live in soundscapes. Rhythms and sounds literally permeate us—vibrating our eardrums, stimulating our nerves. We *feel* music. Bridging the world around us and the world within, music has an ineffable power to connect us to the world, to each other, to our own inner lives. Music can reach deep within us, grab us in places beyond words, and then hang on without letting go. We hear certain songs and suddenly feel as we did when we first heard them. Emotions of joy or pain, love or sorrow tumble into the moment as if released across time.

Music in its vast diversity and endless variety invites us to play with its contours and possibilities. To follow well-worn paths of familiar harmonies as well as to improvise an unexpected phrase. At times we long to hear a favorite song again and again. At other times, we groan when *that* overplayed song begins on the radio. (Perhaps some of us feel that way right now about certain Christmas songs!)

With all its power and possibilities, music is not easily defined or contained. Like the diverse humanity that produces and enjoys music of all kinds, music resists neat boundaries and singular, unchanging definitions. Rather, music shifts, evolves, changes. Through the interpretations and personalities of performers, even an ancient piece of music can take on new and renewed life each time it is played or sung.

Like breath, music expresses life. And, the musical expressions of life range across the emotions and experiences being alive. From the aching heartbreak of a country ballad to the rage exploding from an electric guitar, music in its many different forms expresses the complex, emotionally rich experience of life. Sometimes words alone or any words at all are simply insufficient to convey what we have felt or know deep within about life. This is why music is spiritual. Why music so often can be found in places of worship, of religion.

Spirituality, worship, religion can be arcane, even offensive words to some. And yet, whatever words we choose . . . what I believe we do share is a sense of an inner life, an emotional life, a sense that human life is about more than the mundane of sleep, eat, work. Music is one way we connect to this 'something more' of life. Music helps to remind us, to place us within the experience of beauty, of longing, of anger, of sorrow, of being alive, of being connected from the inside out to a larger world.

“When he sings . . . even the birds stop to listen,” writes the author Suzanne Collins. Music has the power to express life and connect life . . . even across species, perhaps across differences of many kinds. Listening is also a part of music. We can listen for the life expression emerging out of the song of another. It may not be the song we would sing or prefer to hear, but I wonder what we might learn by listening to the songs of others? What might we be able to learn about another’s experience of life by listening to their music?

In a moment, we will listen to the choir and the musicians perform carols in a language and cultural style that is different than many of our own. As we listen, what do we learn, feel, remember about life—our own or another’s? Music has power. Music is life. For these few moments, allow the music to remind you of the power of the life that flows through you, through all of us . . . within and all around us.

So may it be.

Amen.