

**A Sermon preached by the Reverend Barbara Cawthorne Crafton at the Opening Service of Interfaith Worship of the Boston National Convention of the American Guild of Organists on June 24, 2014, the Feast of St. John the Baptist, at Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Boston, MA.**

John 3: 22-30

“After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he spent some time there with them and baptized. John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim because water was abundant there; and people kept coming and were being baptized – John, of course, had not yet been thrown into prison.

Now a discussion about purification arose between John’s disciples and a Jew. They came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.” John answered, “No one can receive anything but what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, “I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.” He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.”

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“He must increase, I must decrease” -- the theme of many an annual budget meeting, I suppose, when they are seeking frills to cut and every year you wonder to what extent you will be one of them. How strange a thing it is to be an artist preparing for service in communities of faith, because to be an artist means that from a very early age -- I think probably from birth or perhaps even before -- you are preparing. You are honing your skill. You are single-minded about it, some of you so single-minded as to appear to be something in addition to being human. I don’t want to say less than [laughter] but more than. *More* than. And so you eat and drink and sleep it for so many years. Your schooling is about it. Your friends

are about it. You are all about becoming the best musician you can become, and part of that becoming is competition, isn't it?

Of course it is. We seek to be the best we can and some of that is in comparison with other people. I want to be better than him. I want to be the best. I want to be first. It is how human beings become better than they were. They become it by striving, and they become it by competing. And therein is the rub, because in churches you're not supposed to compete. You're not supposed... Well, you're not supposed to *look* like you're competing [laughter]. There's a kind of dressage. You know dressage? It's the way of making a horse do what you want it to do without anyone being able to tell that you're doing it. There's a dressage to being a church musician. You need to have this effortless glide, and at the same time it is extremely confrontational. It is extremely competitive. All the while needing to look like you're not doing it, all the while needing to mouth a sort of pacifist message about the body of Christ all being one, and that means you all have the same idea and you all agree about what should be done. Well that just isn't so, is it? You don't have to spend much time in any church to know that that is just not the way the world works [laughter].

How do you take this ego that has been formed by your own excellence which God gave you? I don't think anybody can become a musician who is not already one in some way. The first move is God's. It always has been. And you respond, or don't -- I don't think most musicians are capable of not responding -- by working your butt off, to be the best you can be, to take that gift God gave you and run with it, and climb with it, and make it just the best. How do you domesticate that drive? How do you subsume it to the needs of someone else, to the needs of a larger community? It is so hard, and everybody says, "well, don't take it personally. No, no, no, no, we're cutting you 25%, but don't take it personally. Besides, the raises the clergy get, their convention says we have to do that [laughter]. So our hands are tied, really."

Don't take it personally, but how can you not? When your whole personhood from birth -- and I say from before birth -- has been wrapped up in becoming what you have become, how can you not take something that is so integral to you

personally? Oh, you do learn how to do that. You learn the way we learn most things well: the hard way. You're not always Number One and you learn how to deal with that. You're not always going to get everything you want. Most people learn to ask for more than they want, so that they can perhaps meet in the middle somewhere. You learn the hard way to contain the ego.

You're used to hearing preachers say, I'm sure, that the ego is a bad thing. But why is that? I don't think either Freud or Jung thought the ego was a bad thing. People confuse it with "egotistical" meaning it's all about me. But to have an ego doesn't mean it's all about you. It means that you have a self. It means that you are who you are and that is the self you desire to present to the world and that is the self you hone, and that is the repository of all your gifts. There is nothing wrong with having an ego. And the world teaches you – I'm sure the church teaches you -- not to let it get out of control, because you get your hand slapped when it gets out of control. Or life messes with you when it gets out of control, mainly by having to be the musician for the people. You enter at a young age hoping that you will raise them to new heights of musical sophistication, and you do that. You give them things they have not seen. You wait at the door for their thanks, but they're all at the other side of the church talking about how you don't do it the way your predecessor did, and how come we're singing all these hymns that nobody can sing? And where did he come from with all this? Did you hear what he did in the middle of that hymn, showing off like that? [laughter] "What an ego," they say.

And then they want to get married, and if they're English they want you to play "Jerusalem" at their wedding. **Why?** [laughter and applause] Or if they're American they want you to play "Amazing Grace" at their wedding. **Why?** [laughter] Well, because they really don't know any other hymns. And "Jerusalem" was the one they had in school, and they all sang it and they all felt like one in it. And "Amazing Grace" was the one they had at their grandmother's funeral, and they all sang it, and they loved their grandmother and she's not there now, so let's have "Amazing Grace" at our wedding. And you struggle with that, and, in the end, it happens. Then they die, and they want "I Sing a Song of the

Saints of God” at their funeral, and probably “Jerusalem” also [laughter], and probably “Amazing Grace” also. **Why?**

Well, because when they were little they sang that song. You touched them at a primitive part of their bodies and their souls. Music opens the whole psyche, not just to the reality of today, but to the reality of the whole of their lives. You open it up, and there its beating heart is, open and naked and fragile. You have done that by opening them up. And if some stuff is in there that, well, might not be exactly what you would choose for a certain occasion, in your best moments you give thanks that some music is in there, and that perhaps if you are able to work with what they have, they learn then to work with what you have, and what you have is splendid as the starry night. What we have is so full of beauty and so multitudinous that we could give them something wonderful every day for the rest of our lives and never run out. We would never run out of wonders to give them.

And so, if they don't always understand us, if they seem to want to cut us down to size, we know at least at the best of times that these are growing pains in them, that if we allow them their foundation, whatever it may be, they will allow us their ceiling which will ascend, and ascend, and ascend, higher and higher until it reaches the very gates of heaven.

“He must increase,” John says. “I must decrease.” In the middle of your career you are so longing to form the music program, to make it as beautiful as it can be and as wonderful as it can be, and as your time gets toward the end, when you have a few decades in, when you're sitting at your console and you think, “You know what? This is probably my last job. Imagine that!” When you think about hanging up your toe shoes and retiring, you will say, “Well, what did my life mean? What did it mean that I was there every Saturday afternoon all those years? What did those Thursdays mean? What about all those interludes, and all those postludes, and all those singers, all those children? Was it enough? Was I all right?”

Well, let's listen to John the Baptist at the end of his life on this his feast day. Let us listen to him. He sent word to Jesus from prison, remember? He sent word to

Jesus saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" What is John saying? "I'm in prison. They're going to cut my head off tonight. Tell me that what I gave my life for was not a mistake. Tell me that it hasn't all been for nothing." And Jesus sends back a message so full of love and respect I can hardly stand it. He said, "See, the lame are walking, the blind see. Be at peace, it was not for nothing. It was all part of what is unfolding."

Not too long later Jesus himself is at the end of his life and knows it. Jesus himself must turn it over as we all turn it over, Jesus himself. A martyr, a martyr being one who loves life. Martyrs aren't people who don't want to live, those are just suicides. Martyrs are people who love life and love God enough to set that love of life aside. At the end of their lives they realize what it means that it's not personal. It's not personal. It transcends my birth, my life, and my death. I'm a part of it but it doesn't end with me. What a joy to have been, oh, I don't know, a brick, or a pipe, or a flying buttress, something that holds the edifice together and makes it glorious. What a pleasure it has been for me to be here with you, musicians, hundreds and hundreds of them. People who have made my life in the church a glory, who will sing and play me to sleep when my life in the church is over, and will continue to nourish and challenge those who come after me. How blessed we all are in our increase, and even more blessed in our decrease.

And now unto God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, dominion, glory, and power, from this day forward and forever more. Amen.