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Date: November 24, 2019
Sermon Title: "Music Has Charms to Soothe"
Scripture: 1 Samuel 16:14-23
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

1 Samuel 16:14-23

Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, 'See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better.' So Saul said to his servants, 'Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me.' One of the young men answered, 'I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the LORD is with him.' So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, 'Send me your son David who is with the sheep.' Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his amour-bearer. Saul sent to Jesse, saying, 'Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.' And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

Today's a two-sided coin. Our 10:30 worship is a full-throttle celebration of music as we honor Sandra Murphy on her retirement. Sandra has been our organist and choir director for 50 years, a stunning and spectacular accomplishment. That's 2,500 Sundays of worship, many, many hundreds of funerals and weddings. Since 1969, people counted on Sandra's music to lift their spirits, touch their hearts, strengthen their resolve, and give voice to their faith.

At our 9 AM service, minus Sandra and all the guest musicians and the public ceremony, we are still using today to celebrate music and its place in our Church life and spiritual life. Our Scripture lesson is quite a Bible story, isn't it? It's one of our first introductions to David. Not *this* David, but the more famous Biblical

David, the killer of Goliath, the king of Israel, the writer of songs, and the prized ancestor of Jesus. *That* David.

In our Bible story for today, David is still a teenager. God has already ordained him to be the future king of Israel, but for right now, Israel already has a king. King Saul, and he is not very stable. The Bible tells us from time to time King Saul would get taken over, possessed, by an evil spirit, and he would literally lose his mind. It doesn't specify how Saul manifested his mental illness, but we can guess: bipolar, schizophrenic, manic-depressive, passive-aggressive. Or anger issues.

Remember, this is 3,000 years ago, before therapy or counseling or medication. Saul would just strike out against the world beyond anyone's control. Except for music. When Saul heard music, especially the gentle music of the harp, "he would feel better," the Bible says. "Relief would come to him, and the evil spirit would leave him."

Perhaps inspired by this story, the English poet William Congreve wrote the famous line, "Music has charms to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks or bend a knotted oak." (William Congreve, "The Mourning Bride," 1697)

And it is certainly true. When my life gets too hectic, too crazy, too out of whack, I go over to Alexa and gently say, "Alexa, play the cello music of Dvorak." And just like King Saul, "relief comes to me," and I feel better, calmer, recharged.

While in seminary, I started a coffee house near Newton, Massachusetts, and it quickly became very successful. Threatened by our success with teenagers, one night, a group of young Mafia (as the police chief later told me they were) came into our coffee house, wrecked the place, and beat the daylights out of my partner and me. After the hospital released us, we went back to our dorm. It was about 4 AM, and we were hyper, depressed, in pain, angry, our 1960s idealism shattered. We were a mess.

What did we do? We called Boston's best rock 'n' roll radio station and made some requests. Then we listened. Soon we got some "relief" and "felt better." The next week, we reopened the coffee house.

When tragedy befalls our nation—9/11, Columbine, Newtown—we throw open the sanctuary. We plan a special service. And we put a lot of thought into music. Because we know people will come here. They will seek out our Church; they know we'll have something for them. They'll come in here alone or with their family right after the tragedy. Or later to be with people at our public prayer service. And there will be words, sure, words of comfort and assurance and strength; words in prayer, words in a message, words from the Bible, yes.

But music will set the tone. Music will fill the Church. Music will permeate all we do. It may be taped music during the day, while people sit quietly in a pew. And when we gather as a Church, the prelude, the hymns, the choral pieces will be chosen with care: mournful, hopeful, powerful. An almost impossible blend. But it will happen. And it will work. And it will transform our brokenness into healing and resolve.

I had a root canal this week, and while waiting for the Novocain to kick in, I Googled "music" and found some wonderful quotes:

"Without music, life would be a mistake." (Nietzsche)

"Music gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and life to everything." (Plato)

"There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats." (Albert Schweitzer)

"Music was my refuge. I could crawl into the space between the notes and curl my back to loneliness." (Maya Angelou)

"Music is a language that doesn't speak in particular words. It speaks in emotions . . . it's in the bones." (Keith Richards)

"Where words fail, music speaks." (Hans Christian Andersen)

"A person should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day his of life, in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful" (Goethe)

"I think music itself is healing." (Billy Joel)

"One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain." (Bob Marley)

Sandra will love this one from Kurt Vonnegut: "Virtually every writer I know would rather be a musician."

Leonard Bernstein: "Music . . . can name the unnameable and communicate the unknowable."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "Music . . . will help dissolve your perplexities"

There is a lot of commonality there, isn't there? Music heals. Music works. Music is vital, central, a key component to life itself.

Sandra has done all that, and more. For 50 years. Think of America from 1969 to today. Whatever America was going through, whatever you were going through, we had this steady presence, Sandra Murphy, ever ready, almost mystically in tune with what was needed. She is a consummate professional, "classy" in every sense of the word, and "classic," as a person and a professional.

In all our years together, she never said "No" to an idea or request. Oh, she could raise an eyebrow or two, and she has a withering, cryptic sense of humor and observation, but she is a team player, always looking for and demanding the best.

Yes, Sandra lives all those quotes from Billy Joel, Nietzsche, Keith Richards, Goethe, Schweitzer, and Leonard Bernstein. Indeed, she has been our Bernstein.

Let's go back to our Bible story. How does music do it? Whatever rage consumed King Saul, whatever made everybody around him afraid and worried, whatever forces were at work to discombobulate him, how did little David, the teenage shepherd boy, showing up with a harp, playing his fingers over the strings, how did that bring relief to that tortured soul? How did that music soothe the savage breast of the fearsome King Saul?

How does music do it? First, you have to listen. Music makes you stop and listen. I'm not talking about "elevator music," or "Muzak," as we used to call it. I'm talking about music where you stop everything else. You sit, you listen, you look and watch, and take it in. And listen.

Not all music does it. And not all are moved by the same music. But for all there is a music that will stop you. And you'll want to be stopped. Grab you. And you'll want to be grabbed. Make you sit down and listen. And you'll want to sit down and listen.

Second, some music is made for healing. Poor Sandra, she's been stuck with Alida and me all these years. Me, a Green Day fan; Alida, Bruce Springsteen all the way, with Tom Petty and the Rolling Stones thrown in.

But Sandra and her beloved sister Karen grew up at the feet of their legendary mother, Juliet Shaw, one of the world's foremost players of the theremin, one of the world's most unusual instruments, something you play by running your hands over sound waves, never actually touching the instrument. It produces an almost heavenly, ethereal, otherworldly sound.

Not all music does it. Plenty of music is bombastic, meant to get you out of your seat onto the dance floor or marching off to war or protest or rally. But the music of David's harp and Sandra's life invites you to slow down, stop, take a breath, take it in, listen, let it work on you: on your mood, your spirit, and your faith.

And that's the third reason music works: inspiration. The word "inspiring": well, look at it. It literally means to put the spirit in you, in-spiriting, the spirit, the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit enters you through music. We may not always attribute that. We may not always call it that, but that's what's happening.

God works through cellos and oboes and pianos, choirs and orchestras and soloists, tunes and melodies and rhythms. David's harp. Sandra at the organ, her sister at the piano, their mother on the theremin—all gifts of God.

When we add in your voice, all together we "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." That's what God deserves. That's what we enjoy. That's what Sandra has devoted her life, her career, her passion and faith to make it happen.

Let's conclude by singing together "Be Thou My Vision," No. 595 in your hymnal.

*Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.*

*Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
thou my redeemer, my love thou hast won,
thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.*

*Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always:
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
Great God of heaven, my treasure thou art.*

*Great God of heaven, my victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.*