

Thomas Stumpf, Music Director  
November 30, 2014  
Theme: Truth  
Sermon: Truth and Time

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on"

The theme for this month's services at Follen is Truth. The theme for next month is Time. So it's Time for Truth, and I plan to tell you some Truths about Time. And because I am who I am, I'll use Music as our guide. I hope this provides a satisfactory explanation for the particular craziness of this service.

I'd like to start with a poem by W. H. Auden entitled "If I Could Tell You."

Time will say nothing but I told you so,  
Time only knows the price we have to pay;  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

If we should weep when clowns put on their show,  
If we should stumble when musicians play,  
Time will say nothing but I told you so.

There are no fortunes to be told, although,  
Because I love you more than I can say,  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

The winds must come from somewhere when they blow,  
There must be reasons why the leaves decay;  
Time will say nothing but I told you so.

Perhaps the roses really want to grow,  
The vision seriously intends to stay;  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

Suppose the lions all get up and go,  
And all the brooks and soldiers run away;  
Will Time say nothing but I told you so?  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

## Reflection 1: The ticking of the clock

One of the things that bothers me most about the word Truth is that nowadays we pretend it is synonymous with the word Fact. The fact is that the words Truth and Fact are not synonymous. The truth is that we can use Facts as a way of running from the Truth.

There exist abstract concepts by which we attempt to understand the Truth about the human condition. What we do in reality is make these infuriatingly difficult concepts less intractable and more malleable to our purposes by creating measurements into which we force them. This is a sometimes almost desperate effort to make them assessable and quantifiable. Then in questionable but understandable fashion we call those measurements Facts and feel that we have wrestled these concepts to the ground, that we have somehow tamed their wildness to our will. In Truth, we have done nothing of the sort: all we've really done is to some extent deny our humanity and impoverish our souls.

Too abstract? I'll make it as concrete as I can by using the example of - you guessed it - Time.

Time is one of the primary concepts by which we attempt to make sense of the human condition. And it is indeed an infuriatingly difficult concept - for centuries it has stumped philosophers and scientists alike. The need to measure it seems necessary and almost instinctive; and some kinds of measurement are provided for us by nature, by the journey of the earth around the sun and the orbit of the moon around the earth. Once upon a time these were enough for us. But as we evolved we demanded exactitude. The Egyptians first invented hours, though of variable length; the Babylonians first gave us minutes; a Persian scholar was the first to measure time in seconds. Since 1960 we have UTC (Coordinated Universal Time) as the primary time standard by which - in Wikipedia's wording! - "the world regulates clocks and time." Since nature apparently abhors equidistant units - and human beings apparently can't live without them - the system had to be adjusted several times until leap seconds were adopted in 1972. Several proposals have been made to create a new system that would eliminate leap seconds, but so far no consensus has been reached.

Even Time needs consensus? And can I just tell you how happy it makes me that nature refuses to cooperate fully with humankind on this, and throws at least a little spanner in the works?

Despite silly adjustments like leap years and the even sillier leap seconds, we feel that the Truth about Time resides in our clocks and our calendars. They give us a way to deal with the passage of time, which would otherwise be so terrifyingly elusive. But oh how we complain about them. We moan about alarm clocks that we ourselves set. We groan that the hour hand tells us when to be at work, when we have to attend a boring meeting, even when to go to bed. We sigh that even if we want to meet with a good friend for a good conversation the two of us have to get out our calendars.

I'm not going to pretend for a minute that we can live without clocks and calendars and such. Nor will I pretend that they are soul-destroying in and of themselves. If we allow them to impoverish our souls, it is because we assume that their factual reality gives them the power of Truth. Some of us know enough to seek the Truth elsewhere, and so we assume that clocks and calendars must be rejected - and then we're frustrated because that rejection is simply not possible.

Time will say nothing but I told you so. And in the meantime the clock ticks on.

If genuine and deep Truths about Time truly lie elsewhere, human beings must surely have symbols where they are to be found. It won't come as much of a surprise to you that I believe Music is one of the most powerful of those symbols.

First of all, there is the Truth about Time that flies in the face of all clock-and-calendar Fact: Time simply refuses to always pass at the same rate. We *know* that there are minutes that pass so slowly they appear to be hours; that hours can pass so quickly that they seem like minutes. How beautifully music can symbolize this. At no time does the exact passage of Time seem more irrelevant than when we listen to a piece of music, most especially one we know and love deeply. A song - whether it's Brahms' "Die Mainacht" or Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" - may last no more than a few "actual" minutes: but it may encapsulate for me an eternity fulfilled with meaning. A three-hour piece of musical theater - whether it's Verdi's "Don Carlo" or Bernstein's "West Side Story" - can pass in what is for me no time at all, almost literally (if I dare use that word in this context).

Time will say nothing but I told you so. And in the meantime the clock ticks on.

[Yehudi Wyner's Fantasy "Dalla cappella al casino" played]

Do you hear the clock ticking? Or does the non-tonal harmony put you off from hearing anything else and not allow you to understand? Don't forget: the surface of the music - in this case the Fact, if you like, of its non-tonality - is never its meaning. But let's try again, and make things a little easier this time by choosing an old warhorse of mine: Chopin's fifteenth Prelude.

[Chopin's prelude 15 played]

Do you hear the clock ticking now? Or does the elegant beauty of the melody put you off from hearing anything else and not allow you to understand? Don't forget: the surface of the music - in this case the Fact of its well-known and immediately accessible melody - is never its meaning. There *is* a ticking clock - and, as the great French pianist Alfred Cortot said of this piece, "death is there, in the shadows." It emerges from the shadows as the piece continues... Yes, the simple reiteration of the beat is a symbol of the ticking clock, and yes, that is a reminder of approaching death (the ticking clock usually is!) - but no, it isn't morbid because we had that exquisite melody at the beginning, and it comes back at the end. And all melody is the song of the human spirit, and the Truth that we can let our

spirits soar above the inexorable passage of Time is one of the things that saves us. That at least is one of my Truths, both about Music and about Time and - most importantly - about the human spirit.

Do you think I am inventing these meanings? Then listen to the ending of another Chopin Prelude.

[Chopin Prelude 17 played]

Do you hear the tolling of the bell? A student of Chopin's wrote that Chopin "always struck that note in the same way and with the same strength, because of the meaning he attached to it. He accentuated that bass note - he proclaimed it, because the idea of that prelude is based on the sound of an old clock in the castle... Chopin always insisted the bass note should be struck with the same strength - no diminuendo, because the clock knows no diminuendo."

The clock knows no diminuendo. Perhaps only a musician could put it exactly that way, but there's a thought that places itself with astonishing precision at the intersection of Time and Truth and Music.

More in a little while....

## Reflection 2: Past, Present, Future

Did you hear the clock ticking as you listened to that beautiful piece by Schubert? Oh wait, you say, there was no clock ticking this time? Why? Because you couldn't always hear it? You are too literal. The beat in music of all cultures, like the ticking clock in our (first world) perception of time, never disappears: audible or inaudible, "square" or syncopated, it's always there. Furthermore: the ticking of the clock, the beat in music - these are almost always metaphors for the human heartbeat. So long as we're alive, the heartbeat is always there too. The poet Conrad Aiken had a remarkable way of conflating clock and heart:

What is time, the heart says what is time.  
The heart is ticking on the mantelpiece.

Now on to a second reflection on the Truth about Time.

There's another important and apparently inescapable way that we human beings have sought to get a grasp on Time using something we consider Fact: the division of Time into Past, Present, and Future. Now surely this is Truth as well as Fact, since our spirit feels it as much as our intellect knows it.

Though this may fly in the face of all common sense, it turns out that as a factual concept the tripartite theory of Time is very elusive indeed. Let's examine the Facts, and who better to guide us in Fact than Saint Augustine... He wrote in his Confessions: "How can the past and future be, when the past no longer is, and the future is not yet? As for the present, if it were always present and never moved on to become the past, it would not be time, but eternity."

Sixteen hundred years later and a multitude of philosophies apart, Jean-Paul Sartre, in his book *Being and Nothingness*, said much the same thing: "The past is no longer; the future is not yet; as for the instantaneous present, everyone knows that this does not exist at all but is the limit of an infinite division, like a point without dimension."

Well yes, perhaps everyone does indeed know this - yet we continue to live as if Past, Present, and Future were three separate realities. And what a welter of problems this poses for our overburdened souls.

Take the Past. How often it's a cause for regret, a veritable sequence of melancholy what-ifs. How often it misleads us to inane nostalgia - the "good old days," which probably weren't, and if they were, how does that help us now? We would like to think that the Past should be a guide to understanding the Present - it's what got us to this point in Time, no? But by now we know how unreliable and how selective our memories are (remember Claire's sermon about the canary?). If memory is so deceptive, how can we possibly understand the Present in relation to the Past? No wonder our popular culture is full of satisfying tales of the rewinding of Time, of living the Past over and getting it right so that the Present stands corrected...

Take the Present. A meaningless fiction if ever there was one. What do we mean when we use the word? It can mean this split second of time, it can mean roughly these five minutes, this morning, this month, this year, this era. And yet how often we are told: live in the Present. In the Now. It's all you have. Sometimes this is good advice, no matter how inexact. But I also know that sometimes it is just too damn difficult to live in the Now: sometimes we need to look ahead, to fill the Present with hope for the Future. In the words of Carl Sandburg: "I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down, a sun dropped in the west. I tell you there is nothing in the world only an ocean of tomorrows, a sky of tomorrows. I am a brother of the cornhuskers who say at sundown: Tomorrow is a day."

Tomorrow? All right, let's take the Future. It may indeed be a comforting source of hope, in which case we may believe in "an ocean of tomorrows, a sky of tomorrows." But that can be as unhealthy an avoidance of the Present as nostalgia for the Past is. Above all, the Future is far too often a source of fear and anxiety; the unknown scares us every time. No wonder popular culture is full of stories of those who can travel into the Future, who return to tell the tale and are able to correct the Present...

In his book *Art and Experience*, John Dewey summed it up for us: "Most mortals are conscious that a split often occurs between their present living and their past and future. Then the past hangs upon them as a burden; it invades the present with a sense of regret,

of opportunities not used, and of consequences we wish undone. ... But the live creature adopts its past; it can make friends even with its stupidities, using them as warnings that increase present wariness. ... To the being fully alive, the future is not ominous but a promise; it surrounds the present as a halo. ... In life that is truly life, everything overlaps and merges. But all too often we exist in apprehensions of what the future may bring, and are divided within ourselves."

So tripartite Time is neither factually nor spiritually satisfactory?

Back to Sartre, who has his own answer to these vexations: "Temporality is evidently an organized structure. The three so-called "elements" of time, past, present, and future, should not be considered as a collection of "givens" for us to sum up - for example, as an infinite series of "nows" in which some are not yet and others are no longer - but rather as the structured moments of an original synthesis. ... The only possible method by which to study temporality is to approach it as a totality which dominates its secondary structures and which confers on them their meaning."

Time as an indivisible totality? For once, amazingly enough, many philosophers and many poets and many physicists agree. After Sartre's slightly convoluted prose, here is T.S. Eliot's gorgeously dense poetry:

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in time future  
And time future contained in time past.  
If all time is eternally present  
All time is unredeemable.  
What might have been is an abstraction  
Remaining a perpetual possibility  
Only in a world of speculation.  
What might have been and what has been  
Point to one end, which is always present.  
Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden.

And then there's physicist Albert Einstein, who said it very directly on the occasion of a friend's death: "Now he has departed from this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion."

Time as a totality - present and past contained in a future which is itself contained in the past - the being fully alive, not divided within itself - where are the human symbols for these ideals? No surprise here either. Music is the art form that exists exclusively in the dimension of Time, and is therefore one of the deepest and most genuine expressions of the unity of Time.

When I begin to play that Schubert movement, I can know where it will lead. When I play the middle section of it, I can understand how it got there and I can begin to feel its conclusion coming. When I play the very end, I can grasp the whole movement in its totality.

In order to be able to achieve anything like this level of understanding, whether as performers or as listeners, we have to get to know a piece of music inside and out. Sometimes when we first hear a piece we have an inkling of its completeness: we intuit that everything is related to everything else and that anywhere along its path in Time, Present, Past and Future form an indivisible whole. The more we listen, the better we get to know it (and this happens entirely intuitively, without any esoteric theoretical knowledge), the deeper the satisfaction we derive from this sense of wholeness. Whatever surface beauty the music may have, that beauty is deeply enriched by this satisfaction.

A deep satisfaction that life in its unpredictability is only sporadically able to provide for us. Yet part of our human-ness is to seek it constantly. Whether we know it or not: we seek it whenever we listen to a beloved piece of music over and over again. Every great piece of theatre is a search for that form of satisfaction. We seek it very personally when we tell our stories, and when we write our journals. We seek it in psychotherapy as we try to understand our Past in relation to our Present and our Future.

We try to find a deeply satisfying answer to all the mysteries of Time in the form of God, the one Being whose existence we place outside of Time. Love, like God itself - or perhaps because it is as close a synonym to God as we can achieve - appears most fully itself when it exists outside the constraints of Time.

And so this search for the meaning of Time, for understanding its oneness, is part of our search for Eternity. We do this in the full understanding of our own ephemerality. The juxtaposition of the quest for the eternal and our acceptance of the ephemeral is not some quixotic illusion. It may have its tragi-comic side, but it is also at the core of anything that we can ever understand about the nature of the Universe, and it is certainly at the core of everything we can ever understand about the human condition. For our reality is not what we cynically call "real life." We are not the stuff of facts, or logic, or even reason; we are not the stuff of measurements and assessments and quantifications, or of precise definitions. We are, as Shakespeare's Prospero says, "such stuff as dreams are made on."

1. The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself—  
Yea, all which it inherit—shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

Rather than analyze these lines, so extraordinarily rich in meanings about Time and Truth, I have asked the choir and our pianist Shaylor Lindsay to end this reflection appropriately enough with an astonishingly beautiful musical setting of them by Ralph Vaughan-Williams.