

Commentary on Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem* (10/27/19): Rev. Dr. William C. Pender

INTRO: In the music world, you often hear about how one artist “covers” another artist’s song...like a modern group singing a song originated by the Beatles—that’s a “cover.” The *Requiem* has over 2,000 “covers”—from Mozart to Dvořák. I hope that you read (or have read) the extended program note to prepare for this worship experience, led by our choir, instrumentalists, and choirmaster/organist/harpist, Mark Pace. We have Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem*—his cover of an ancient worship expression that fits with the upcoming 1st of November—All Saints’ Day or All Hallows Day—“Hallows” being Old English word for “Saints” (and, of course, the eve to that day—Hallows’ Eve, the day before All Hallows (Saints) Day).

We begin with *Introitus – Kyrie*: the “Introit”—a prayer for peace for those who have died, concluding with one of the oldest Christian musical texts: *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison*: Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy. Here the language is not Latin but Greek—one of the earliest texts sung by Christians.

INTROITUS – KYRIE

SEGUE: We move from the *Introitus - Kyrie*, skipping over one movement (the *Offertorium*) to two movements: the “Holy, Holy, Holy” (in Latin: *Sanctus*) and the “Merciful Jesus” (in Latin: *Pié Jesu*). You may be wondering about the use of Latin. Perhaps you could make the case that Latin is a dead language and that using it in worship is “deadly” boring! However, the original vision of using Latin in worship was this—that you could go into a Christian worship service anywhere in the world—in Japan, in the Congo, in Chile, in Baltimore, in Paris—and have the same language of worship. That is, at the door of the church, we drop our differences of nationalities and adopt the same language...quite a vision! Let us continue now with the *Sanctus* and the *Pié Jesu*.

SANTUS and PIÉ JESU

OFFERING: Peace or “requiem” does not come from us; we do not make peace happen in us; we cannot achieve peace. No, peace or “requiem” comes as the gift of God. The choir in this next part of the *Requiem* will acknowledge God’s gift, God’s offering—the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Our response is to offer ourselves in worship. Let us continue in worship—the choir reminds us of God’s offering as we receive the morning offering.

AGNUS DEI

OUR END: The *Requiem* pushes us to consider our mortality and what is beyond. Most of us do not spend much time considering what is beyond our mortality. Indeed, consider the popular name for a funeral service today: “A Celebration of Life.” The word “funeral” seems to have become downbeat and morbid; so we reframe the experience as a “Celebration of Life.” And, at first hearing, that seems right and hopeful. Who needs to be morbid and sad when one can “celebrate?” What I have found, however, is that the focus on the “celebration of life” is solely on the life that is finished—the stories, remembrances, and the like are about what is over. Indeed, there is almost a contest to see who can tell the funniest story at a “Celebration of Life.” And I confess to thinking: “Is that all there is?”

Here at First Presbyterian Church our worship bulletin phrase is this: “Witness to the Resurrection.” That is, we gather in worship to say that God’s love extends through this life and beyond. We give witness...witness to the resurrection of Jesus that is central for us. And indeed, the ministry of Jesus is central to how we face death.

In Jesus’ teaching ministry there is actually very little about “life after death.” Jesus had the absolute conviction that Death is not the final word, but he did little in spelling out details about what resurrection life will look like. Jesus’ attention is on living today, in the present—about forgiving, about loving neighbor, about welcoming the stranger, about going the extra mile, about turning the other cheek, about acts of generosity.

And even when Jesus speaks of life beyond the grave, his focus is on how we live our life now. In the *Requiem* text, there is a reference to Lazarus, the pauper or poor man. This is an allusion to one of the few times that Jesus even speaks of “the life beyond the grave.” Listen to this parable of Jesus:

Luke 16:19-31: ¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

Here are two takeaways from this parable: First, the way we lead our lives now has a connection to the way we will lead our lives beyond the grave. We have the distinct futures of Lazarus, the poor man, and the unnamed rich man. Now note, there is nothing here that says that Lazarus was a particularly moral person...simply that he is poor. In some ways, poverty limits how moral a person can be. When you’re hungry, it is hard to think about sharing. Wealth, on the other hand, gives you the opportunity to be generous, to be charitable, to be willing to help. If you know the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, one of the signature songs is “If I Were a Rich Man.” The focus of the song is not about how I would wallow in wealth if I had riches, but rather how, if I were rich, I would have time to study the Torah, to talk of faith, to provide for my family, and so on.

Reflecting on our guests from the Congo last week, it is clear to me that none of us could or should sing “If I Were a Rich Person,” because we are rich—we have food, shelter, transportation, education, and health care that far outstrip what is in the Congo. So Abraham is talking to us when he says to the rich man: “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.” Challenging words...but Jesus’ intention in telling this parable is not about what life is going to be like for us in that life beyond the grave, but more about how we are invited to live now. So, the first takeaway is that wealth comes with expectation: To whom much is given, much is expected.

There is a second takeaway: the rich man may have lived an unaware life...unaware of the poverty around him (though note: he did know Lazarus’ name), but...but the rich man is not an uncaring, self-centered individual. He does love his family. He is concerned about his family’s future. He wants someone to go and warn his five brothers.

In some ways, the rich man wants his brothers to have a “Jacob Marley” experience. Jacob Marley, as you may recall, is the deceased partner to Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. Marley appears to Scrooge, wearing all the chains that he, Jacob, forged in his earthly life and that he is doomed to wear into eternity—chains forged in his lack of openness to love, mercy, and charity. Scrooge, through the witness of Marley and others, has the opportunity to live differently. Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* is a counter to Jesus’ parable—someone coming back from the dead can change us! The conclusion to Jesus’ parable is this—they, the rich man’s brothers, will NOT be convinced even if someone comes to them from the dead.

The way we lead our lives now extends into our future...and this parable raises the challenge: Will someone coming back from the dead be enough to persuade us to live differently...to live generously, to live lovingly, to live honorably? How does “The Witness to the Resurrection” guide our lives? Let us ponder that as Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem* concludes.

IN PARADISUM