

Transcribing the Music of God

(2 Timothy 3:14-4:5)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 20, 2019

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our creator, our sustainer and our redeemer. Amen.

Among all the problematic stories and opinions that flood my Facebook feed every day (and I'll simply leave my description of it at that one adjective – *problematic!*), there also are (thankfully!) moments when I'm introduced to something wonderfully new or experience a moment of joy.

I have been a lover of classical organ music my entire life, and because of that love I follow a number of Facebook groups for organists, composers, organ builders and even particular instruments. Earlier this week, one of those moments of joyful discovery appeared on the page of the Polish organist Lidia Ksiazkiewicz. It was a video of a piece called "Libertango," written by the Argentinean composer Astor Piazzolla and performed by her during an international organ festival in the town of Roquefaire, France. This was not a piece with which I was familiar, so I did a little homework and discovered some fascinating things.

It was first composed and recorded in 1974 – not originally for organ, but rather for a small 11-piece band. Piazzolla, a well-known tango composer, had decided to go in a new direction from the usual style and embraced "nuevo tango," a movement combining classic tango with aspects of jazz and classical music. This particular piece is so beloved that in the past 45 years it has been covered and transcribed for a variety of different groups and instruments: organ, as with the version I saw; piano; orchestra and trumpet; and even cello and bandoneon (an instrument similar to an accordion), with Yo-Yo Ma in one of the lead roles. In fact, there are dozens of different arrangements to be found on YouTube.

At this point you're probably asking yourselves, "What in the ***world*** does ***this*** have to do with ***anything?***" If you are, I certainly don't blame you. Believe me, I wasn't simply looking for a convenient way to work the words Ksiazkiewicz, "Libertango," Piazzolla, Roquefaire and bandoneon into conversation. In all seriousness, this ***does*** relate to something from today's readings: the last line from the passage from Second Timothy. I'll say those words once again: "As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully."

Do the work of an evangelist. Carry out your ministry fully.

What we just heard comes from what is known as one of the Pauline pastoral letters, likely written by a disciple of Paul although it is impossible to rule out the apostle himself as its

author. Regardless of who wrote it, the author has set out in plain language what we are called to do. The words here are an admonition that hearkens back to a similar statement shared by Jesus in Mark's Gospel: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."¹ Jesus had told his disciples to be evangelists; here, we're getting a reminder of that direction.

Where's the connection between these words and an organ transcription? To return to the musical theme with which I began, the statement in the Pauline letter is the composition that has been created. What's missing, however, are performance notes. There is nothing saying that you have to play the piece in very particular way. There is no suggested tempo; there is no particular key offered; there is nothing telling us whether to play it softly or at great volume. We don't even know what theological instrument we should use.

Here, in the verses of this passage, there is **nothing** shared with Timothy as to how **specifically** to be an evangelist ... what the step-by-step process is for carrying out this ministry. Yes, we see things in broad terms: "[P]roclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching."² But those lack specificity or even acknowledge unique individual approaches. A style of proclamation by one will be different with another. The act of rebuking may come easily to one and be terrifying to another. It's easy to be persistent when things are good, but not when they are bad. As we all know, depending on the day or circumstances patience may be hard to come by.

We are left with broad strokes, but no particulars ... and **that** is where **our work** begins. We have to determine what transcription works **for us**, and how we will perform our own arrangement of the piece written into this letter to Timothy.

How **will** we do the work of evangelists? What might it look like to **carry out** our ministry **fully**? You've heard me talk about those who live into their work through volunteering at the food pantry. Others take part in planning and serving at community meals. All those who serve in some capacity in worship – our singers and musicians, our greeters and ushers, our lectors and intercessors, our crucifers and chalice ministers – are living out an aspect of their ministries. In their own way, each is a type of evangelism.

Each of those is an activity directly tied to the life of this church and its work in the world. Each activity is bound by a certain period of time: services have beginnings and endings; dinners have starts and finishes; the pantry has set hours of operation. So what about the time we spend **away from the church**? What is our evangelical work on Monday morning or Thursday afternoon? Do we allow the fullness of our personal ministries here at the church to extend into our trips to the market ... or the post office ... or dinner with friends?

¹ Mark 16:15 (NRSV).

² 2 Timothy 4:2 (NRSV).

Evangelism isn't a part-time job. Living into our faith at only 75% isn't living into the fullness – the **complete 100%** – of our ministries. Now I'm not advocating for particular things ... to go ringing your neighbors' doorbells, for instance, or stopping people on the sidewalk, or putting a box on the corner and stepping up to perform as a street preacher. I won't even say there's just one single way to do evangelism or ministry – because there's **not**.

The words of the letter writer – and the words of Jesus before that – are a simple, single commission; how we live **into** that commission is an individual process of discernment. It's up to each one of us to determine what evangelism means to us and how we feel led to fully invest ourselves in our ministries.

It's up to each individual to determine what the words to Timothy mean to them.

It's up to us to take the song that has already been written – to sit down with the tune of the “Libertango” in our lives – and determine how to create the transcription that best captures our vision.

It's up to us to take the tune laid out by the writer of this letter and make it our ministry ... our unique gift ... our unique performance ... for our brothers and sisters in the world.

Amen.