

# THE EVENHANDED 'BRAVO'

A Sermon on Colossians 3:12-17 and Romans 2:7-11—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart  
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1.

Besides the music, perhaps the most interesting part of a concert is the applause. Growing up in a musical household and establishing one of our own, I have attended dozens of band concerts, in addition to church choir concerts and other amateur music performances.

And at the end of many performances involving children and youth, there's that awkward moment where the applause begins but people wonder whether there will be a standing ovation. When it's a borderline case, it may come down whether there's a critical mass of passionate parents who will be so overcome with pride and joy that they will just jump out of their seats and applaud with great vigor, as if instead of a middle school band concert with squeaky clarinets and out of rhythm percussionists, we had just witnessed the 1812 Overture performed with real cannons. 'Bravo! Bravo!' a particularly passionate parent or grandparent may even shout. When the passionate parents do this, it's difficult not to at least stand up and join in the applause, however much or little we ourselves are moved. 'Okay, I'll stand.'

This tension plays itself out in worship services as well. The performance sensibility has seeped into many churches' worship culture, so that at some places of worship, every anthem is followed by applause. This congregation it turns out straddles the line between traditional no applause sensibility and more contemporary applaud all the time sensibility. Some of the difference in perspective can be attributed to generational expectations. When church

leaders and I hosted the discernment dinners last month, a vast majority of boomers and older were anti-applause in worship, while Generation X was mixed, and the youngest adults were like, applause is great! Keep it coming.

Beyond generational stuff, we may think differently about applause in worship depending on who do we think worship is FOR. If we emphasize that worship is us offering praise to God, then the perspective can go that it's not our job to applaud, it's God who receives the praise. From this perspective, applause is like self-congratulation, "Look how awesome we did that for God!"

But if we emphasize worship is intended to benefit God's people, if we are the doers and the hearers, then applause makes more sense. It reminds me of another kind of worship service we hold here occasionally—the wedding. At the church wedding I say that the audience is both God and family and friends. Without calling on God to bless the wedding, it's silly to have a wedding service in a church; without calling on family and friends to gather, it's silly to have a wedding in a 500-seat Sanctuary! The vows for instance are the main event of the service in my book; people gather to hear the couple speak those words. They are intended for the two of them, but the couple invites the congregation to overhear them. A wedding is for God to bless a couple, a wedding is for family and friends to bless and overhear the commitments made by a couple, and a wedding is of course for the sake of the couple getting married. The congregation applauds—at the end—but only once the transformation

has been complete, only after I sat the magic words, the couple has been declared married and they kiss.

Sunday morning worship is like that, too: it's for God and for humans. We perform for God but we who offer the music or who overhear it can be moved by the Spirit to respond occasionally.

2.

What holds for worship services holds true to me also for service, for how we serve and for whom we serve. As Christians we serve others for the sake of others, and for our own sake, but first of all for God.

Let's look at our reading from Colossians. This reading is actually used occasionally at weddings, it'll be read at a wedding I'm officiating in October. Earlier in Colossians, the author urges the church in Colossae: "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith..." (Col. 2:6). Live in Christ, be rooted in him be built up in him, be established in the faith in him. Live in and for God through Christ. And in today's reading in chapter three, the author specifies how to live in Christ: "Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." Bear with each other and forgive as God has forgiven you. "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Living for God means living in compassion for others. It's a variation on the theme of the Love commandment: Love God with your all, and like it, love your neighbor as yourself. Let your love for God overflow in the world, let your love for God be overheard by those who need to hear loving words, let your

praise for God lift up not only God the parent of us all but also God's children. Let the gifts from God given back to God be shared by God's people. This is what the author of Colossians is talking about. Or, as the author concludes the reading: "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." Through serving others we serve Christ and through serving Christ we serve God the parent of us all.

In other words, we serve our parent by serving our sisters and brothers. We may or may not get along perfectly with our siblings, but because of our love for our parent, who made our life and upbringing possible, we honor our parents by loving their children. And in the case of God, all people are God's children.

3.

In Romans chapter 2, Paul reminds the Christians in Rome that judging others isn't our place, that it is God's place to judge, because as humans we tend to forget that we usually have done the same kinds of things that we condemn others for. God is the right judge, for "God shows no partiality."

I agree with what Paul writes, but imagine that the impartiality of God is not just related to judgment but also to love.

The late Sue Pavelko, member of this church, was known for saying to one pastor, "that was the best sermon I ever heard," and then a month later would say to another pastor, "that was the best sermon I ever heard." She meant it both times. She also apparently said such things to her friends, grandchildren and children. It was not that her judgment was

impaired, it was that for all her judgment, her love always surpassed it.

God is the ultimate passionate parent who not only claims us but who also who roots for us, at every performance in human history and through the Holy Spirit has applauded whenever we offer gifts in love and harmony.

God is impartial but also ultimately invested in what each of us does because we are all God's children, born into God's creation as creatures with potential and faults. When Jesus says love your neighbor and love your enemy, when Paul says God is impartial, it is because they have experienced God's evenhanded bravo of all of us. Regardless of our tribe or background, God stands in love.

When we pay attention to this we are transformed by God's love to stand too, perhaps reluctantly at first, but eventually, if we try it long enough, in mutual appreciation that we can not only applaud each other but serve each other.

And so our and the church's service is an echo of God's evenhanded bravo, the affirmation that we not need to prefer the sound of one song or genre over another at the concert to see the worth of the music and the musician who is playing, whom God judges and loves.

When we resettle refugees and people getting back on their feet we claim God's evenhanded love for all people, regardless of where they have lived or whom they worship; when we loan out medical equipment we look beyond what got them to this point of disease and see the healing touch of the one parent of us all reaching out to them; when we feed children and grown ups we follow in the steps of those first disciples who gave everybody they could

something to eat, no questions asked about who deserved it. Evenhanded, not prejudicial, but unconditional as possible, in the image of God who calls us not to judge but to live through Christ.

God is in the pew; God is in the front row; God is listening, watching, hands folded together, waiting in patient love for the service to continue.

Amen.