Holy Improvisation: When the Spirit Takes a Solo

1 Corinthians 12: 1 – 12

A sermon by Rev. Dr. David Clark

Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – February 1, 2026

KC Jazz Conversation

For many folks, loving jazz is as natural as loving ice cream. For me, it was more of an acquired taste. It's not that I didn't like it. It just felt like background music rather than something to savor.

Then one night, on a trip to Kansas City with some clergy friends, I found myself in a cramped jazz and blues club—the kind of place where the drinks cost too much, and the tables are too close for private conversations. I was half-listening when the trumpet player closed her eyes and bent a note, so blue it felt like she'd reached into my chest and played back to me a sense of loneliness I didn't even know was in there—until that moment.

The bass player had felt it too. He nodded and walked a line underneath that said, "I'm with you. I've got you." The piano joined in, creating this bed of sound that made it safe for the trumpet to wail even bluer, even more honest. It felt like the instruments weren't just playing music, they were in a conversation with each other, the kind of conversation that flows and just keeps getting deeper and more nuanced. A brainstorming session that keeps moving closer to what's lying just beneath the surface—until someone names a truth you've felt all along but couldn't put into words.

And it felt like the crowd's energy fed the conversation, making us feel like we were part of it, too. Nobody had planned this moment. There was no sheet music for this particular ache. But because they'd been listening—really listening—they created something none of them could have made alone.

That's when jazz stopped being background noise and became something I craved like ice cream.

Jazz and the Body of Christ

I think jazz is a beautiful metaphor for enriching our understanding of what Paul was trying to tell the Corinthians when he told them to think of themselves as a body that functions well together, rather than a bunch of isolated, selfish jerks. Always finding fault with others. The people didn't have a template on how to function together, so they brought the meanness and self-centeredness of the outside world into their church.

Paul is like, "No. Man. Be better. Work together. Like a body, all the parts are necessary. As important as an eyeball is, it's worthless if it's lying on the ground and not connected to the rest of the body.

I think there are some things we can learn from jazz that can help us understand how to function better as a body. They apply to any group, really. A family, at work (lots of books have been written on jazz and leadership), community, church, and even our nation.

If jazz is a conversation, the key is to **listen deeply** to each other. Don't just hear the notes, the words that people say, but feel what's underneath it, where it comes from.

They learn to play together **without any one instrument dominating** the others.

In jazz, the musicians take turns with solos. And help each other shine as they express their authenticity. **Can you help someone shine?** Don't be afraid to express yourself. Your thoughts, your voice matter and make us better together. So what if your ideas, beliefs, or skills are different from others? That's the point!

Play it the way you feel it.

One of the wonders of jazz is the emphasis on improvisation. There is no score, no script. There are some boundaries, key and time signature structures, and distinctive jazz chords with emphasis on 7ths.

I think life is like that. In the next chapter, Paul gives some boundaries. The song is going to be about love. How we treat each other is going to be marked by patience, kindness, gentleness, not being arrogant or boastful or rude, not keeping score of wrongs. Rejoicing in truth. Believing, hoping, and enduring through all things.

Some people act as if God has written a score and each decision we make either fits in or does not. Is it right or wrong? As if God has everything mapped out. What you are supposed to do for a job, who you are supposed to marry, and which people to befriend. Like it's all some cosmic test with God up there ready to mark your permanent record with red ink.

How we see God shapes how we treat ourselves and others. If God is a harsh rule maker watching for people's mistakes, you will be too.

It's frightening to live like that when so much weighs on every decision. Pastors want to ease that burden, so they are happy to tell you, dictate to you. Who to hate, who to exclude, what movies to watch, what to wear. And people are glad to give that burden to them. Give up their agency. But that's not how I read the Bible.

But I think it's more like jazz. We're playing the love song. Stay within those structures and improvise. As Stevie Nicks sang, "Play the way you feel it." Do what seems best for you. Trust yourself.

Pivoting from a wrong note.

It can be risky to take the lead to play the solo when it's your turn. There's a vulnerability. What if you can't figure out what the next note to play is and you're just sitting there stuck, letting everyone else down? What if you play the wrong note? Relax. Your group's got your back.

Here's the thing about improvisation: mistakes happen in nearly every performance. Notes crack. Timing slips. Someone misreads the moment.

But in jazz, mistakes are not the end of the song.

A wrong note is just a note until the next one is played. They don't panic. They pivot. They repeat it, resolve it, turn it into something unexpected. What sounded like failure becomes texture. What felt like an error becomes an expression.

Life works the same way.

We make choices that don't land. We say things we wish we could take back. We hurt people. We miss opportunities. We fall short of our own values. Miles Davis says what matters isn't the wrong note, but the next note. Will you learn from your

mistakes, will you find ways to incorporate them into a better understanding of yourself, and be more empathetic toward others?

Paul never pretends the church will get it right all the time. He assumes the opposite. That's why grace matters. That's why love matters. That's why the body needs each part—to help one another recover when the music goes sideways. We improvise, use what we know, and build on that. As a church, the solutions of the 1950s aren't necessarily what the moment calls for.

God is not standing there with a red pen, circling the errors. God is leaning in, listening for the next note. Trusting that even our missteps can be woven into something beautiful.

God Created Jazz

So create a beautiful life sweeter than ice cream because it is said on the 13th day of creation, God created jazz. And God saw that jazz was very good. It could lift hearts and gladden souls.

It could teach people to listen more deeply.

It could teach people to work together.

It could teach people to support each other.

It could remind people to take some risks, not playing it safe.

It could remind people there is something within that is good.

To follow the spirit.