

When I was a little girl, I had a terrible time taking compliments. I can remember so many times when people would say something nice about me and I would openly and obstinately refute their statement, telling them, essentially, thank you, but you're wrong. This happened, more often than not, around piano recitals. I did a lot of them when I was a student, and while I mostly played pretty well, they were always agonizing affairs. I would sit in the audience, waiting for my turn, my palms slippery with sweat and my head racing through the music. Would I remember how it went when I got up there? How could I remember how it went when I got up there? But I inevitably would, and most of the time I left those recitals happy and tremendously relieved.

But on those occasions when my playing wasn't my best, when I had a memory slip or fumbled over a particularly tricky passage, when I felt myself rushing with my own quickening pulse or just not connected to the music in any meaningful way, well, then I became a

terror. God forbid someone come up to me after the concert and tell me that I had done a good job. Oh, no, sister, little Erika Takacs was going to put you straight. No, I didn't, I'd say. I fell all over the keys in that one run, and the last few measures had more wrong notes than right. And off I would go, feeling terrible, but also somehow terribly justified. I'd been awful, and at least now that person knew it.

Now my mother, God rest her, was a truly patient woman. She never yelled, truly, in all of the twenty years that I was blessed to know her. She never lost her temper and nearly never even showed any frustration. That is, except for the moment after one of my recitals when my mother heard me rejecting yet another compliment. I don't even remember what I had played or what had gone so wrong. I only remember that whatever happened, it was for my mother the string that broke the proverbial soundboard. After seeing me send yet another person away after an awkward refusal of their kindness, my mother pulled me aside, and in a voice I had never heard before and

never heard again, told me to knock it off. “Erika Lee Takacs” – I don’t remember, but I must have gotten all three names – “Erika Lee Takacs, when someone gives you the gift of a compliment, you just take it. Even when you don’t agree with them, it doesn’t matter. It’s a gift. So the next time someone says that they liked your playing, just smile and say thank you and shut up.” Obviously, I have never forgotten this moment, and I have never forgotten to be grateful to my mother for her wisdom. It has been a great gift to me to follow her advice – just smile and say thank you and shut up.

It does make me sad, though, to consider the reasons I felt I had to reject those gifts in the first place. It was, I think, because I was such a perfectionist. I had extremely high expectations of myself and so was very, very hard on myself. I wanted so desperately to be perfect that even if I weren’t perfect, I wanted to see my own imperfection perfectly. It was too awful to imagine someone else seeing my mistakes and thinking that I hadn’t seen them. Oh, no. I knew them all too

well. I would carry them home with me, tuck them under my pillow, pack them in my bookbag and bear them around for weeks. I was wound up so tight in my quest to be perfect that I couldn’t let anything in, not even the little gift of a compliment.

Which is why Peter breaks my heart. Here he sits, in a room filled with extraordinary emotions – hope and fear and expectation and tension and sadness. In some ways, it must have been an agonizing affair, complete with sweaty palms and racing heartbeats. Peter has tried, he has been trying, for so, so long to get everything right. And he does, and then he doesn’t, and when he doesn’t, I imagine that he was as hard on himself as anyone. “Get thee behind me, Satan,” spoken to him by his master was likely *nothing* compared with what Peter said to himself later in the wee small hours of the morning. Peter has tried to be a good disciple, but he knows all of his mistakes and carries them around with him like rocks in his pocket.

And so when Jesus comes to him on his knees and prepares

to wash his feet, Peter just can't take it. Are you going to wash my feet? he asks. Jesus tries to reassure him – you won't understand this now, but later you will understand. But Peter thinks he understands all too well. This is the job of a servant, a slave. This is a menial task, this is something he wouldn't even necessarily do for his master, this is far beneath the dignity of this man that he has been following. Peter knows it. And he wants Jesus to know that he knows it. And so he refuses the gift. Lord, you will *never* wash my feet. And, heaven help me, when I hear Jesus' words I can only really hear them in my mother's voice. Unless I wash you, you have no share of me. Peter, just smile, and say thank you, and shut up.

It hurts my heart to hear this story. Because I know exactly what that feels like – I imagine that most of us know exactly what that feels like. We say Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, and we stop there, mired in our unworthiness, trying so hard to cover up our own fears about our lovability with our constant,

painful, abusive striving for perfection. We tie ourselves up so tight that we cannot let anything get in, even a compliment, a gift, the very Grace of God. This is a shame, this is a sin, this is something that breaks God's heart.

You know, as a child, it never occurred to me that maybe the people who were complimenting me heard something in my playing that I didn't hear. I never imagined that maybe they were saying, yes, Erika, we heard the way you fell all over that run, but goodness, the opening few pages were glorious! I never left room for the possibility that they could see something in me that I could not – that I had played well, that I wasn't perfect but I was good, I was lovable, I was worthy.

Tonight, this wonderful, heartbreaking story about Peter reminds us that Christ sees something in us that we don't always see ourselves. Can you allow for that possibility? Can you allow for the possibility that Christ sees more beauty, more loveliness, more

worthiness in you than you see yourself? Can you allow for the fact that Christ sees in you every single note, played in the way that only you can play it? That yes, he hears the clunkers, he sees the ways that we slip and stumble and fall all over ourselves trying to run, but that he sees great beauty in us anyway?

Tonight, take the gift. Allow Christ to remind you in this foot washing and in this Communion that he sees something in you that is more than perfect – it is precious, infinitely precious to him. Allow him to unbind you from the ways that you are tied up so tight that you can let nothing in. Allow him to give you the compliment of his presence, of his service, of his body and blood blessed and broken and given for you – not some perfect version of you, but you, as you are known and loved by him right this moment. Take the gift. And smile, and say thank you, and then, and I say this with all the love in my heart, shut up.

*Preached by Mother Erika Takacs*

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