

Sermon – A Call to Harmony  
Sunday, December 8, 2013  
Scripture Readings – Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13  
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As we continue in the expectation and hope for peace this Advent Season, we turn now to Scripture. Our first reading is Isaiah 11: 1-10. This beloved prophet who lived in the eighth century B.C.E. during the reign of four kings watched the surrounding super power of Assyria cut down the monarchy of Israel. The stump of Jesse refers to the reduced kingdom of Jerusalem and those portions of Judah after the Assyrian assault in 701 B.C. In Chapter 11, Isaiah gives voice to his hopes for a new day - - A shoot will come forth from the remaining stump. A new age of royal government and international peace is envisioned. Listen now for God's word. (Read Isaiah 11:1-10.)

Our second reading is Romans 15:4-13. These verses conclude Paul's discussion on unity in the faith; a unity threatened by different understandings of the proper response to the gospel. Paul affirms there is room within the Christian community for different responses and warns against any attempt to impose uniformity. In a call for harmony, Paul pleads for respect within a larger framework of responsibility. A responsibility to welcome one another in the welcome we have received from God. Paul, quoting the Psalms and Isaiah, reminds Jewish and Gentile believers of the inclusive nature of God's love. No people are excluded from God's mercy. The goal of God's act of grace in Christ is unity and harmony among all God's children. Listen now for God's word. (Read Romans 15:4-13.)

The title of the sermon: A Call for Harmony

*The text: May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Jesus Christ." Romans 15:5*

Let us pray. O Lord our God, in this Advent season as we anticipate and prepare to welcome your arrival, teach us the ways of harmony in our lives. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts be in full accord and acceptable to you. Amen.

Music, especially during the Advent and Christmas seasons, has a way of touching our hearts and spirits, giving a greater depth of meaning to the words that express the hope and joy of our faith.

This morning I would like to share a personal memory about my own adventure in music as the daughter of a church organist. Perhaps because my mom was musically gifted herself, she assumed her children would be also and enthusiastically set out teaching my brother, my sister and me to sing in harmony.

We would sit around her piano and she would teach us the melody of a song until we could carry a pretty good tune. She would then proceed to sing the accompanying notes that, because

of their different tones, would blend with our notes to make an agreeable sound. In theory, the end result is harmony.

In our home, the end result was one frustrated musician and three bewildered children. Because, without exception, we would blithely begin singing the same notes that our mother was singing. Even if our little ears could differentiate among our voices and the voice of our mother's ... our little voices were not strong enough to continue to express themselves, once the clear, strong voice of our mother began singing the different notes.

As long as our mother sang the melody with us, we did fine. Even if she would only accompany us with the piano we could sing the melody. But when she sang or played notes that were different from the notes we were singing, we could not continue with our own melody. Therefore, harmony was impossible.

I can remember trying different experiments to aid in my ability to sing in harmony. Two in particular:

For a time I thought if I sang really loudly that would solve the problem. I believe, in psychological terms, this is known as overcompensating. My mistake was equating quantity with quality. My volume only drowned out the other differing tones.

When this approach failed, I tried again. This time my logic told me I could carry my melody if only I wasn't distracted by the differing notes... so I proceeded to cover my ears, trying desperately to block out the other voices. I believe a psychological term for this might be "denial." My refusal to be attune with the other voices prevented the possibility of harmony and rhythm. It wasn't a pretty picture.

My final alternative was to appreciate the harmony of other peoples' voices and recognize my own limitations. A conclusion my mother helped me reach somewhat gracefully by affirming my gifts in other areas.

The theory which I present this morning is that life is not unlike music... and just as there is an art and a discipline to singing in harmony so is there an art and a discipline to living in harmony.

When Paul exhorts his Christian friends in Rome to unity with "a call for harmony", he is not equating harmony with the sameness of thinking and acting...quite the contrary. Paul believes any attempt to impose uniformity will rupture the unity of first century believers...a diverse group to say the least. He warns against setting one's own understanding of the proper response to the gospel as the norm against which to judge all other responses.

Not only does this prevent harmony by reducing life to one pitch—to a monotone! Paul rightly sees the danger of this kind of self righteousness as bordering on self-idolatry...setting up something other than God as god. In this case, oneself, one's own point of view and one's own preference...a tendency which is incredibly strong within each of us.

Paul calls the first century believers - - the followers of Jesus to a new way of life which would reflect the strength of Christ's character. He encourages them not only to live together but to welcome those who are different, people who go about things differently and yet, who share a common purpose and affection.

Differences, which when enhanced in the melody of life, bring about a blend of harmony, and agreeable sound, a depth and a richness that gives us a glimpse of the world for which we long and wait.

Paul redefines strength in his call for harmony. Strength is not insisting on one's own way but respecting ways that are different. Strength is being confident in oneself and one's relationship to God - - so much so that living alongside those that are different is not threatening.

True strength does not drown out the voices of others; neither does it try to block them out. True strength is able to sing more softly or more loudly, depending on the mix, to balance the blend in a harmony. A harmony that is possible when one has a voice which is strong enough to stand on its own and an ear which gently listens to the voices of others.

Or to quote Francis DeSales: *Nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing is so gentle as real strength.*

The Apostle Paul's understanding of strength is the picture of strength portrayed by the prophet Isaiah in the vision of what is to come when God's rule is complete. The one who rules in righteousness is the one who understands the others' perspective, the one who listens with compassion, wisdom and respect. The one who identifies with the weak and the vulnerable...

In this is true harmony according to Isaiah – when the strong no longer need to devour the weak but live side by side. In this is peace and wholeness... the meaning of the Hebrew word *shalom*.

Today, we wait with Isaiah and we wait with Paul... a little closer in our understanding of that for which we long and hope and our role in it.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, 2013, we join brothers and sisters around the world remembering and honoring the life of a man who led with the gentle strength of which Isaiah and Paul speak. Nelson Mandela listened to the voices of the rich and the poor, the strong and the destitute so that he could unite them in harmony as he departed from prison and ascended to the Presidency of South Africa. He chose reconciliation over revenge and accomplished the unthinkable, ending apartheid and creating a scene not unlike the vision of Isaiah...where former adversaries, live together in peace, side by side, without overpowering one another or denying the other.

As we prepare this Advent Season in the blend of our lives together here at Westminster, in our homes, our schools and our places of work. May we be mindful of Emmanuel "God with us"...May we reflect the spirit of the child who came to lead us and who taught us to celebrate the loveliness which is possible when we live together in peace, side by side, when we are confident enough with our own melody to join the harmony of life.

*Nothing is so strong as gentleness. Nothing is so gentle as real strength.* So be it. Amen.