

THE HONDAS IN THE BIBLE

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 7, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Walking by a Blacksmith Shop, Pythagoras Discovers Harmony of Tone

The way the story goes (This would be 500 B.C.), Pythagoras was walking by a blacksmith shop, and he heard the blacksmiths hammering away at metal on their anvils. True to his genius, Pythagoras noticed that the different hammers were producing different tones, so he walked into the shop and tried to figure it out. He quickly realized that the weight of a hammer had to do with the tone. The heavier the hammer, the lower the tone. The lighter the hammer, the higher the tone.

With his interest in numbers, Pythagoras began to figure that a hammer half the weight of another hammer produced a tone that was twice as high. What would come to be known as an octave was higher than the tone produced by the hammer that was twice the weight of the lighter hammer. He then realized the relationship between weight and numbers.

He also worked out simple ratios, such that a hammer weighing three pounds and another hammer weighing only two pounds resulted in a three-to-two ratio that produced a harmonious sound. If the ratio was off from those simple integer ratios, it didn't sound pleasant to the ear. Following his genius, Pythagoras understood that there is a relationship between music and number.

So then he began experimenting. Bells, according to their weight, produced the same

ratio of tones, and if the weight was off, the sound was off. Cups, each one identical but filled with different levels of water, produced tones of that same nature. There were pipes like the ones in our organ, but different in that one could strike them with a small hammer to make a tone. All else being the same, if their width and thickness were identical and the lengths of the pipes were in those simple ratio relationships, that would produce harmonious sounds.

Two Boards, Some String, and Weights Produced Musical Chords

Finally, Pythagoras set up two boards, placed strings across the boards, and then tied different weights to these strings. With ratios of 2 to 3 to 4 to 6 to 8 to 9 to 12 to 16, those ratios produced chords that were harmonious to the ear, pleasant-sounding. There are even medieval woodcuts that exist to this day showing the great Greek mathematician experimenting with cups and pipes and hammers and bells.

In Greek, "harmonia" means agreement or concord. The verb form means "to fit together, to join." Now, the music side of it is rather scientific. However, there are plenty of nonscientific illustrations that are unbelievably complex.

You might remember this song from Sesame Street:

“Three of these things belong together;
Three of these things are kind of the
same.”

Then the teacher brings out four things that a child can figure out three of the things have a commonality and the fourth one doesn't. Children can understand this by looking for patterns in objects.

Intelligence quotient tests are designed to stretch you, although they might make you feel unbelievably dumb no matter how smart you are. Some questions on IQ tests will do the same kinds of things. They'll show four objects, and what three have in common isn't obvious unless you're very smart. They test to see if you can find the three of these things that have something in common. It might be simple like the second letter of their names. Or it might be completely obscure until you finally see the distinction.

So this is a sermon about harmony. I wanted to give you a feeling for it: Sesame Street, Pythagoras, and so forth.

I Ask, Is There Disharmony in the World?

Republicans and Democrats
Jews and Muslims

To go back just one election, do the
1% and 47%
show some serious disharmony?
Black/White and Hispanic/Asian
Straight and Gay
Tea Party and the Bern (Sanders)

Yes, there's disharmony in our world. Rodney King was made fun of when he said,

“People, I just want to say, ‘Can we get along? Can we get along?’ ”

The answer was, “Of course not.” There's too much disagreement, too much hatred, too

much of this and that. Of course, we can't get along.

But in our pair of scripture readings this morning, the one I read was:

“And above all these, put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:14).

And the one Deb Miller read had this line:

“Live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:16).

Which then begs the question, “Well, how?” Clearly, we haven't figured it out yet.

“Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion”

I'd like to tell you about some research that can at least move us in the direction of harmony. These are not slam-dunk answers, not comprehensive answers. I'm going to get a bit political here.

What's on my mind is the research of Johnathan Haidt, who is at New York University in the Stern School of Business. A psychologist, he wrote a book a few years ago, a seriously fascinating book entitled, “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion.”

This hits home for me because in my nuclear family and especially in my extended family, there is the whole range from liberal to conservative, from Republican to Democratic. However you want to couch the term, it causes tension, it causes problems. It makes things tense and uneasy and often unpleasant. We have to walk around with eggshells underfoot, even though we're one family. I'll bet it's the same for you, too. Hardly anyone is immune to that kind of dynamic in their extended families.

Babies Are Born with A First Draft of Core Beliefs

The genius of this book is that, while it might sound simple, it's glorious in its simplicity. The core insight is that, although we have a notion that babies are born with a clean slate, he says, "Actually, no. They're born with a first draft, six in particular, of core beliefs."

Here's what they are:

1. Care — don't harm. Every baby is born with this, to care for something. (I'm going to state each one in the negative.)
2. Fairness — don't cheat.
3. Liberty — don't oppress. Babies have a notion of what a bully is, even at the tiniest stage.
4. Loyalty — don't betray.
5. Authority — don't subvert.
6. And finally, sanctity — don't degrade.

Read this list one more time. Let it sink in: the first draft that each of us had when we were a little baby. Since then, our experiences, our reading, the things that have happened to us, have made us adjust these core beliefs so that some are more important than others. They're not all upheld equally for most adults.

Seeing into Disharmony via Politics

Let me give you a couple of examples that show how this kind of insight can help us see into the disharmony that we have in our world. A bit of politics.

- a. Liberals will say, "God bless everyone" — high care on the side of the liberals.

- b. Conservatives will say, "God bless America" — high loyalty on the side of the conservatives.

Probably, the most politically contentious moment that I've experienced in my 60 years was in 2003, when we decided to invade Iraq. In my family, for example, there was high tension between those who knew in their heart of hearts that it was the right thing to do. And others who knew in their heart of hearts that it was the wrong thing to do. Good people — polar opposites.

- a. Liberals say — high care, high sanctity.
- b. Conservatives say — high loyalty, high authority.

The insight from the work of Jonathan Haidt and others is that the liberals, for example, will have elevated levels of lifetime experience in the notion of care and sanctity, so that when they look at a nation, they see its people and its environment.

The conservatives, on the other hand, will have very high loyalty and very high authority. So if the government says, This is what you must do, then that's what they'll do, and they'll support it.

One other quick example: The one that has always been really hard for me to wrap my head around is the pro-life person who is for the death penalty. I have trouble trying to figure that out. But here's an insight into that kind of person because many such people have at the same time high sanctity and loyalty. The pregnant woman is Madonna-esque in their minds. They are holy, very high in sanctity.

And the convicted murderer is one who has betrayed his contract with society, who has

been disloyal to society. So a high-sanctity, high-loyalty person can be one who is both pro-life and also in favor of the death penalty.

Anyway, it's not a slam-dunk kind of explanation of all the issues in our world, but it can move us in the direction of harmony.

Finding Uncritical Beliefs, And Buried Prejudices

The insight that Haidt offers for political discourse is that all six first drafts are good and necessary. But all six can be taken to an extreme in which they become evil, become so completely unbalanced that holding one or two or three of them as godlike and ignoring the others can result in evil that is apparent to all. Therefore, balance is a must, a requirement — harmony in the core values that we have as a people.

And so we must examine ourselves, and I will spend a minimal amount of time on this. In the social media, we see and hear over and over again that Hillary is a liar, Obama is a racist, Trump is a buffoon. But can we leave the playground, the name-calling, the junior-high kind of discourse, long enough to examine two things?

- **Are there beliefs that we hold uncritically?** Are there things that we know to be true but have not yet actually thought them through? Were we to do so, might we come to different conclusions?

Are there prejudices harbored irrationally in the hearts and minds of every one of us? The answer, I'm afraid, is yes for all of us.

Therefore, examine yourselves. Look critically. Look logically. Look deeply inside yourselves and see what you discover there.

The Three Hondas in the Bible

There's the Civic, which is defined as balance or harmony between self-interest and the good of the whole as we examine our hearts and minds while listening to the political discourse that is at full tilt right now. There's the Accord, of course, of one heart. We have different thoughts. We have different opinions. We have different interests. But we can also share one heart.

And finally, there's the minivan, the Odyssey. This is a pilgrimage of starting in one place and moving toward another. My hope is that the "odyssey" will take us to other places that are more mature, more balanced, more of "accord," more "civic."

Finally, it was Paul who said,

"And above all, put on love, which leads to perfect harmony."

Amen.