

# SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on World Communion Sunday, October 2, 2016

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

## A Six-Headed Monster and a Vast Sea Pit

The sermon title, *Scylla and Charybdis*, is a bit unusual. It comes from Homer's *Odyssey*, where the point of the boot of Italy is poised to kick Sicily. Between them lies the Strait of Messina, a narrow body of water that can be a treacherous area of the Mediterranean Sea. (See map on page 2.) Writing about Odysseus' voyage, Homer describes the ship as sailing among twin perils. On the one side is a six-headed dragon, Scylla, looming in the darkness in the background, and in the foreground is the whirlpool, Charybdis. (See illustration on page 2.)

This legend gave rise in Western literature to the concept of twin perils and trying to navigate between them. There are several other adages for this expression — between a rock and a hard place, the devil and the deep blue sea, or going from the frying pan into the fire — all bearing the same sense of fear while trapped among dire circumstances.

In the late 1800's, a political poster from Great Britain illustrated the Vessel of the Constitution Steering Clear of the Rock of Democracy and the Whirlpool of Arbitrary Power. (See cartoon on page 3.) The idea was that the artist didn't really like democracy, but he didn't like the monarchy either. So the vessel of the Constitution tried to steer clear of both, just like Odysseus' vessel in the

strait of Messina between Scylla and Charybdis.

Here's a parenthetical comment on this subject that I must make. When I found the painting on page 2 on the internet, a painting of Scylla and Charybdis, I researched diligently trying to find out who the artist was. Well, guess what? It's Photoshop, the entire thing. Somebody took a picture of the rock wall with the sea in front, and then added the dragon and the whirlpool and finally the ship.

I was impressed by the ingenuity of the work.

## Navigating Between Twin Perils

This notion of navigating between twin perils has a serious side because the perils on both sides of the strait of mind can be dangerous. I would like to suggest that this is also the case for the Church (not so much for this particular congregation but for the Church with a capital C) in a time of transition, as we address our present challenges and navigate our way into the future.

There are two poles to avoid: Scylla represents churches that have all the answers. (You are probably aware of several such cases in your life.) Churches that have the whole gospel. They know what the moral issues are, and they have an answer for each and every one: "Excuse me. I'm sorry, but we just happen to have all the answers."



***THE STRAIT OF MESSINA LIES BETWEEN SICILY AND THE BOOT OF ITALY.  
Charybdis is at the northwestern end of the strait; Scylla is opposite at the northeastern end.***



***ODYSSEUS SAILS THROUGH THE STRAIT OF MESSINA  
Scylla, the six-headed monster, is at center; Charybdis, the whirlpool, is at bottom left.***



***BRITANNIA SAILS BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS***  
*The Vessel of the Constitution steers clear of the Rock of Democracy and the Whirlpool of Arbitrary Power. (At bottom left, the “sharks” are dogs of Scylla.)*

Charybdis is equally dangerous: That’s believing that there aren’t any answers. One of the largest and faster-growing demographics right now in American society is the naysayers, who believe no suitable answers exist.

In other words, you’re asked on some form for a little demographic information: By the way are you Catholic? Are you Protestant? Are you Jewish? What are you? At the bottom of the form, you can choose none of the above. That’s the fastest-growing demographic in American society. People just say, “I’m sorry, none of the above are right for me at all.” And so you are betwixt twin poles.

**A Good Mood Crushed by Naysayers**

I want to tell you a story. I’ve told you portions of this story over the years, but there’s more to it. This is one of those events that I didn’t recognize in full at the time. It changed

my life, helped define who I became as a person, although I walked into it blindly and naïvely.

In Binghamton, back between the two world wars, a number of Catholic priests got together with a number of Protestant clergy and decided to found a breakfast group to support ecumenical dialogue in our city. They settled on twelve members, six priests and six Protestant clergy, including a Presbyterian, a Methodist, a Lutheran, and so forth in addition to the six priests. (No women!)

And so it was done, and it lasted at least a whole generation. (Phil Mitchell, one of the previous ministers here, was a member.) When I had been in Broome County for three or four years, finally I was asked to join the group because somebody had left, creating a vacancy among the Protestants.

I remember thinking at the time that we really ought to have women, but I was new and flattered so did not speak up. This was considered the cream of the clergy in town, and it was a high compliment, the way I interpreted it, to be asked to join, and so I did.

I'd been part of that group about a decade when one morning during breakfast, the conversation turned, as it often did, to interesting talk about our parishioners. They were mostly complaining about this person who did something versus that person who did something else.

Being in a good mood, I decided to tell the group about some of my parishioners. This would have been at my previous church, Union Presbyterian in Endicott, because I was very proud of my membership. So I was bragging and told the group about their various religious backgrounds.

In addition to the Presbyterians, who were members, I also had six Catholics. They weren't allowed to join the church because it would have created family strife. They had to remain Catholic, and so they had been attending the church for 20 or 25 years, but they stayed Catholic.

I also had two Jews who, believe it or not, consistently attended my church. Then I had three persons whose background was difficult to describe. I'm not sure if this is the right term or not, but they gave me the sense of being Wiccan/Pagan as their main spirituality. Although attending a Christian church, their spirituality was more earth-centered, Celtic-centered, Pagan/Wiccan style.

In addition I had several Buddhists. Now the thing about Buddhism is that one can be both a Christian and a Buddhist. You can be both

a Jew and a Buddhist. And so for these people their spirituality sort of went back and forth between Christianity and Buddhism, clearly both. Finally I had one Muslim woman, who attended for about a year until she wasn't allowed to continue with us any longer.

Now I ask you, "Have you ever heard of such a thing at a Christian church?" I was very proud of it, and so I'm telling my Christian brothers about this activity going on at my church, bragging to them, but their response was not what I expected.

They let me have it, both barrels. The events I thought were positive turned out to be profoundly negative as my cohorts pretty much condemned me as a pastor. Their consensus was that there is no way I could actually be preaching the Christian gospel truly, reliably, faithfully and yet have those people feel welcome at my church. No way.

I was devastated. I sat down and shut up for a long time.

### **The Part of the Story I Never Told You**

No sooner had I sat down and shut up, never again to talk about that kind of thing in that group, than an argument ensued between an Orthodox priest and two Roman Catholic priests. I'm sitting there, just listening, sort of licking my wounds. The Orthodox clergyman started it by saying, apologetically and politely, "You know, I really don't want to offend anyone, but the Orthodox faith has the whole truth about God, about the gospel, about the human condition. I'm sorry, I really don't want to step on toes, and I don't want to hurt feelings, but we do have the whole truth."

I'm thinking wow! Sitting there, I'm processing this when the two Roman Catholic

priests take exception: “Sorry, but no you don’t have the whole truth. We do.” And the three of them began arguing back and forth, with each of them genuinely thinking that he had the whole truth about God and the gospel and the human condition.

So now, the reason I brought up the myth of Scylla and Charybdis is that the two poles are genuinely dangerous to think that anyone has all the answers. I struggled while writing this sermon. I strove to come up with the right word for this mental state because I didn’t want to be unkind, but I wanted to be truthful.

The word I settled on was “idiotic.”

You can’t think about God very long or very deeply and still think that you have all the answers. This tells me you haven’t thought about it very much. To think we have all the answers, “idiotic” is the right word for it. Some of these people rely upon what the Bible says about virtually everything. For example, we know what the Bible says about women. We know what it says about homosexuality. We know what it says about evolution. We know what it says about slavery. In each case, that kind of thinking is consistently, profoundly, and dangerously wrong.

Yet the force and the negativity of that breakfast experience changed my life so much for the better. For one thing it helped me to speak up for myself, which I needed to do at that time. I was pretty wishy-washy on such things. It’s sort of like when a psychotic person gets a shock treatment; that’s what happened to me. I got a shock treatment, I got full of ferrules, both poles stuck into me hard, and it changed my life, also much for the better.

Seeing this, I began the tedious journey of examining my beliefs. What was it that I really,

genuinely believed? And then shortly after that breakfast meeting was when I began my doctoral work, specializing in interfaith dialogue.

### **Here’s What I Know for Sure**

Let me conclude by telling you a few of the things that I know for sure. When I look at this, it’s actually not a big list. It’s frighteningly small, but they’re pearls. Each one of these is a pearl in the list of what I know for sure:

- I now believe in my heart of hearts that every faith tradition has its wisdom, its insight into divinity, into spirit, and into human nature. The Hindus and the Buddhists and the Wiccans, every single group has its insight, a worthy insight into divinity, spirit, and human nature.
- I now believe in my heart of hearts that the Golden Rule is the single best moral imperative that the world has ever known. There are a lot of morally gray areas that we encounter in our lives, frequently and profoundly. Morally gray areas where it’s not clear what to do, what to say, how to act. The Golden Rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you — is the single best moral rule to keep in the back of your mind when you are in doubt.
- I now believe in my heart of hearts that the Beatles were right: All you need is love. Take any lousy situation and infuse it with just a little more love, and the situation will improve.
- I also believe that physics is right. That the inner, the invisible, the energetic level, or spirit, is actually our

true nature. It is a more accurate description of who we are rather than the outer, physical, material nature of the human being.

- I further believe that Darwin was right. That we have evolved is certain, but we are getting a lot less press

to ascertain that we are evolving. Who we will be in the future is sure to be more magnificent than who we are now.

- And last but not least, I believe that my Sunday-School teacher was right: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

*Amen.*