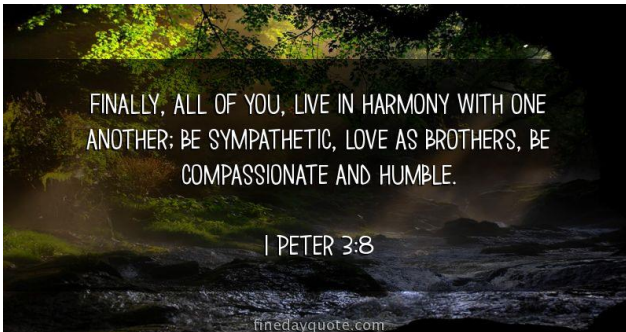


New Hope sermon Living in Harmony with One Another

“An evolutionary biologist at Purdue University named William Muir studied chickens... He wanted to know what could make his chickens more productive, so he devised an...experiment. Chickens live in groups, so first of all, he selected just an average flock, and he let it alone for six generations. Then he created a second group of the individually most productive chickens [the ones who laid the most eggs]—you could call them superchickens—and he put them together in a superflock, and each generation, he selected only the most productive for breeding.

After six generations had passed, what did he find? Well, the first group, the average group, was doing just fine. They were all plump and fully feathered and egg production had increased dramatically.

What about the second group? Well, all but three were dead. They'd pecked the rest to death. *Margaret Heffernan, "Forget the Pecking Order at Work," TED Talk (May 2015)*



Today we look at the scriptural injunction to live in harmony with one another. This has many parts, but a common theme is the unity, love and kindness necessity to achieve harmony. It is not something for superchickens or super Christians. It IS a kind of harmony only the Holy Spirit can accomplish in groups and one on one relationships so we don't peck each other to death through our conflicts and jealousy.

Harmony is a very important concept in Asian cultures, particularly those influenced by Confucianism. In that context it is the social fabric that helps people fulfill their 'proper' socially ordained roles in society. But it is a virtue generally upheld in all cultures. The Biblical culture of Paul's day was no exception. What I want us to do today is to explore the contexts and the content in which Peter and Paul make harmony a scripture mandate for the early church.

Peter has two contexts for his admonition in First Peter chapter three. First he advocates harmony after he has laid down principles of godly husband/wife relationships. Then he adds, "*finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love a brothers, be compassionate and humble.*" Harmonious relationships. Peter is saying, spring out of sympathy for one another, compassion, humility and a love that treats others as family – like brothers and sisters. Harmony coimes from a heart of love for others.

His other context is the persecution that is a recurrent theme in this letter and so he says: "*Do not repay evil or evil or insult with insult but with blessing...Keep your tongue from deceitful speech, turn from evil, seek peace and pursue it.*"

Returning blessing when one is spoken against, reviled, or slandered or physically persecuted for one's faith is a high standard indeed. Peter is advocating NOT only refraining from speaking evil of those who revile you but actually blessing them. This is the opposite from the cultural idea of retribution and payback – hurting others as they have hurt you. Give them blessings instead. This is why we need the Holy Spirit. Such a response is possible only when the Holy Spirit indwells a believer and transforms one's heart.

The Apostle Paul has two places where he describes harmonious relationships in the Roman church and in the Philippians church. To the Romans he says live in harmony with one another; don't be proud but associate with people of low position. The Roman church was a very diverse congregation located at the seat of Imperial power. It would be natural for the haves to look down on the have nots and for those in power to lord it over those of low position in the church. But God was calling them to a new standard of love and humility and harmony. Avoid quarreling. *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be*

conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

His other teachings on harmony are written to the Philippian church. They are our focus today because the implications of harmony are more fully described and the teachings are more applicable to our church.

For the Philippians harmony is closely tied to unity.

Listen to verses 1-4 in the J.B. Phillips Translation:

¹⁻⁴ Now if your experience of Christ's encouragement and love means anything to you, if you have known something of the fellowship of his Spirit, and all that it means in kindness and deep sympathy, do make my best hope for you come true! Live together in harmony, live together in love, as though you had only one mind and one spirit between you. Never act from motives of rivalry or personal vanity, but in humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves. None of you should think only of his own affairs, but should learn to see things from other people's point of view.

The Philippian church was also a very diverse congregation with a wealthy business woman and her family, a jailer and his family, perhaps the slave girl who was delivered from her demons and others. Harmony needs diversity – diversity that is complementary. The term harmony derives from the Greek harmonia, meaning 'joint, agreement, concord, and from the verb harmozo - "to fit together, to join."

His context for the Philippians was the encouragement, love, fellowship and blessing they had experienced in Christ – a fellowship in the Spirit that they shared in common despite their diverse backgrounds. It is the Spirit who gives tenderness and compassion – the very traits needed to live with others in harmony.

Then Paul describes what harmony actually looks like – living in love, as though you had only one mind and one spirit between you. The NLT translates that thought as "*work together with one mind and purpose. Be one in spirit and in the way you think and act.*" It involves a basic unselfishness – where one's own reputation, pride and self-aggrandizement is put away as you look out for the good of others. The Message says, in its usual graphic fashion, "*don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Look out for the good of others.*" Phillips translates this "*none of you should think only of his own affairs but should learn to see things from other people's point of view.*"

That particular emphasis is critical in conflict resolution.

In their book *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me)*, social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson describe how a fixation on our own righteousness can choke the life out of love. They write: "The vast majority of couples [or even friends or family] who drift apart do so slowly, over time, in a snowballing pattern of blame and self-justification. Each partner focuses on what the other one is doing wrong, while justifying his or her own preferences, attitudes, and ways of doing things. ... From our standpoint, therefore, misunderstandings, conflicts, personality differences, and even angry quarrels are not the assassins of love; self-justification is." David Zahl, "500 Years After Luther, We Still Feel the Pressure to Be Justified," *Christianity Today* (12-30-16)

Instead, we need to live together like the tuning fork: "It delivers a true pitch by two tines vibrating together. Muffle either side, even a little, and the note disappears. Neither tine individually produces the sweet, pure note. Only when both tines vibrate is the correct pitch heard." Richard P. Hansen, "Unsolved Mysteries," *Leadership*



Muffle either side. That's an important cautionary note in conflict management. Gary Chapman, in his book *Everybody Wins* tells how to keep from doing this in a conflict situation: "Often the difference between resolving conflicts and arguing is *attitude*... The attitude of an *arguer* [is] a person who insists on getting his or her own way." [He emphasizes that arguing is a legal approach to conflict, where there is a right and wrong and each side justifies its own position to be proven right. They seek to muffle the voice and reasoning of the opposing side. That is a very different mental attitude from what he calls conflict *resolvers*.] "Conflict resolvers say, in effect, 'I'm sure we can work this out in a way that will be positive for both of us. Let's think about it together.' Spouses who adopt this attitude are looking for a win-win resolution...[They will] choose to treat [their] spouses with dignity and respect" (p. 23-26).

Conflict resolvers are empathic listeners. He says, "I use the word *empathic* because most couples believe they are listening to each other, when in fact they are simply reloading their verbal guns. Empathic listening means seeking to understand what the other person is thinking and feeling. It is putting ourselves in the other person's shoes and trying to look at the world through his or her eyes" (Gary Chapman, *Everybody wins*, Tyndale Publishers, 2006, pp. 39-40).

We look out for the good of others and try to see the world through their eyes,. This is Paul's emphasis: "*None of you should think only of his own affairs but should learn to see things from other people's point of view.*"

So, in a conflict, you ask the other person to describe not only what they are holding to but why that position is so important to them and what they would want to see in a good resolution of the conflict. Then you take their insights with your insights, that you make sure they understand as well, and come to a consensus where both party's best interests are maintained.

This is how you speak the truth in love because we ARE members of one another.

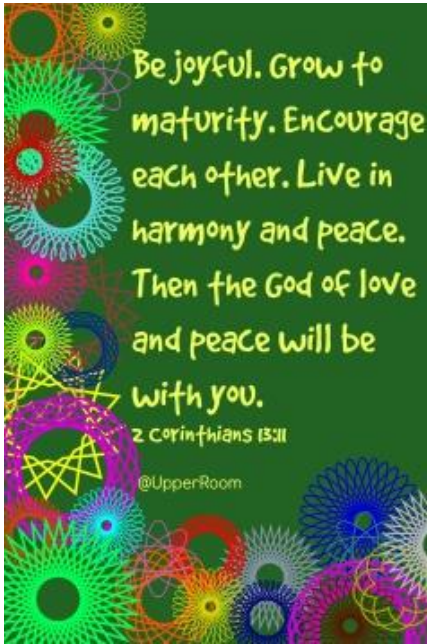
And that puts the emphasis back on the Lord. In conflict as Christians we need to come to consensus about what would most honor the Lord. In a second passage on living in harmony in Philippians 4 Paul speaks directly to the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche. They were obviously leaders in the church who were in significant disagreement. They had been coworkers with Paul and he pleads with them *to agree with each other in the Lord.*" Phil.4:2 In fact, he calls on other leaders in the church to help these women get to harmony. At issue here is the greater good – not which of them had the "right position" but the greater good of the unity and growth of the church. We are to be looking out for the interests of Jesus Christ as we work through conflict and work towards harmony – not our own interests.

Perhaps a key question we need to ask ourselves and each other in any conflict management, unity situation is WWJD – What would Jesus do? What, honestly and humbly is Jesus' position? In Philippians chapter two Paul notes pointedly that Jesus' position was to serve – to give up his own exalted position in heaven and come and take on human form to live and die among us. Phil.2:5 "*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but...taking the very nature of a servant...humbled himself and became obedient in death.*"

Scripture is clear – when we work for peace and unity in the Body of Christ, when we seek to live in harmony with one another, it is a call to servanthood – to seek out ways we can help another reach their highest good.

Living in harmony is essential in a diverse environment. It enables a church or a group to achieve heights not possible otherwise, their highest good. An interesting proof of that was in the Berlin Olympics in 1936 when a ragtag crew from the University of Washington went from backwater

obscurity to a gold medal. They were not men with the aristocratic pedigree of crews from Yale, Harvard, and Princeton...They were kids raised on farms, in logging towns, and near shipyards. They blew away their Californian rivals and bested the cream of New England to become the American Olympic Team that won the gold medal at that Olympics by maintaining a sense of unity amidst diversity. Here's how Daniel James Brown explained it:



[Races] are won by crews, and great crews are carefully balanced blends of both physical abilities and personality types ... A crew composed entirely of eight amped-up, overtly aggressive oarsmen will often degenerate into a dysfunctional brawl in a boat [like the superchickens in the experiment] or exhaust itself in the first leg of a long race. Similarly, a boatload of quiet but strong introverts may never find the common core of fiery resolve that causes the boat to explode past its competitors when all seems lost. Good crews are good blends of personalities: someone to lead the charge, someone to hold something in reserve; someone to pick a fight, someone to make peace; someone to think things through, someone to charge ahead without thinking. Somehow all this must mesh. That's the steepest challenge. Even after the right mixture is found, each man or woman in the boat must recognize his or her place in the fabric of the crew, accept it, and accept the others as they are. It is an exquisite thing when it all comes together in just the right way. *Daniel James Brown, Boys on the Boat (Penguin Books, 2014), pp. 178-179.*

Live in harmony with one another. *“Be joyful, Grow in maturity. Encourage each other. Live in harmony and peace. Then the God of love and peace will be with you.” Amen.*

Dr. M.L. Codman-Wilson 2/25/18

Song of response: We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord;
And we pray that all unity will one day be restored.

Chorus: And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.

We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand;
We will walk with each other, we will walk hand in hand;
And together we'll spread the news that God is in our land.

We Will work with each other, we will work side by side;
We will work with each other, we will work side by side;
And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride.