

With One Voice

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

How many of you enjoy singing? How many of you enjoy singing harmony? I love singing, but I cannot sing harmony. The only time I can sing harmony is if I'm standing next to someone who is blasting the harmony part. There's something in my brain that only hears dominant notes. I love listening to harmonies, but I can't find one to save my life. I'm lucky to be a soprano because we are rarely required to sing the harmony line.

As difficult as harmonies can be for some of us to sing, they are essential components of music. They help convey emotional depth, texture, and shape the mood of piece of music. Without harmony, the music falls flat. Solos are lovely, but even solo artists incorporate backup singers and instruments to pull in harmony lines. It doesn't matter how lovely a voice may be, no single person can be as magnificent as a range of voices singing together.

But with added voices comes added complexity. If one singer or section struggles to follow the conductor's rhythm, the music quickly goes off the rails. If one singer or section misses their pitch, it can pull the whole choir into disarray. The most beautiful pieces of music come together when each section confidently and accurately follows the conductor in singing their distinct part. If sung alone, those sections sound bizarre or even unpleasant, but together those distinctions become magical.

Today we hear Paul pray for the disparate people of Rome. That church was comprised of Jews and gentiles, the powerful and powerless, people from vastly different cultural, religious, and social frameworks. Paul's request of God was for them to live in harmony with one another so that they might glorify God with one voice. Like a well-executed choir, these divergent peoples' lives, while living out their unique identity as God's people in all

their differences, would somehow be enhanced and perfected together through their distinctions. The key would be for them to follow the conductor's direction while trusting and listen to each other.

To follow our conductor, it is helpful for us to remember the theme of the score God is directing. This piece of music we are all making together is the restoration of God's original design. This musical score is called peacemaking.

Isaiah portrays the completion of God's peacemaking as a vulnerable child safely and freely playing among the most threatening of earth's beasts. Peace. No more fear, no more danger or threat. In Isaiah's prophecy, the knowledge of the Lord spread throughout the whole world and brings this perfect peace. So, we ask, what knowledge could be so powerful? The concepts used repeatedly today to describe the type of knowledge necessary to bring this peace are the knowledge of God's righteousness and justice. According to them, righteousness and justice describe God's greatest desire and ultimate reign. God's identity is so wrapped up in both righteousness and justice that anywhere God's conducting is followed righteousness and justice will prevail.

The word righteousness is not one we hear outside church walls, so its meaning gets lost. Righteousness is not moral perfection—it is *relational fidelity*: living in such a way that everyone around us experiences God's justice, safety, and generosity through us. Isaiah uses the word "equity" to describe it. Equity means level ground. Biblically speaking, righteousness does not mean being right, it means making things right. It's living in such a way that others experience God's goodness through us. It is a concept that cannot be lived in isolation; more specifically, it can only be lived out among people who are different from us. Paul emphasizes this by reminding the Romans that the messiah's hope extends to religious outsiders. A musical score requires both melody and harmony. It requires the participation and collaboration of multiple different sounds to produce the one unified voice Paul prays for.

When we arrive at today's gospel reading, we encounter an angry John the Baptist. We could attribute his anger to the fact that he's been living in the wilderness, hot and stinky from wearing a camel hair coat or hangry from eating only locust and honey. But in today's reading his anger is not directed at everyone. He had gathered quite a crowd by inviting people to participate together in preparing the way for the messiah's arrival. He insisted on repentance as his baptismal message, but it was invitational for everyone. Then the religious folks showed up. To be clear, Pharisees and Sadducees were rivals. The fact that they showed up together does not indicate peace between them. It proves Sun Tzu's theory that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". The thing the Pharisees and Sadducees had in common was their ethnocentrism. They believed it was the ancestral blood running through their veins that guaranteed their righteousness before God rather than the way they behaved towards others.

John's message was radical, making a powerful statement proving God's righteousness through equity rather than group affiliation or religious practice. He was baptizing people, offering them remission of sins through repentance at a time when remission of sins was only ever remediated at the temple. John understood that God's kingdom was one of peace, where anyone who desires to know God and live in right relationship with God, is invited to participate...even and especially those without access to justice through religious structures, the fact of their DNA, or even the location of their birth.

The religious elite who came to the river that day were not necessarily evil people. They studied the Scriptures; they spent their lives trying to uphold and enforce what they understood God required. Like all of us, they were blinded by their own experience and their religious privilege. They lacked true knowledge of God. They didn't understand what it felt like to be an outsider, to be excluded from peace with God because of their race, poverty, or ill health. They were like that guy in the choir singing at the top of his lungs, entirely off key, off rhythm, and completely unaware because he's looking so closely at his music that he fails to notice the conductor's directions. Can we all admit that has been us

from time to time? We like feeling right over those who act or believe or look differently than us, but true affiliation as people of God will always lead us to harmony that sounds like one voice. We must sing our unique part with confidence, while also supporting those whose part sounds different from ours. A choir is not a competition; it is a team. Following God is peacemaking by upholding equity through love.

To emphasize this point, both Isaiah and Paul talk about the messiah as The Root of Jesse. (Quick history lesson: King David was the pinnacle figure of the Hebrew monarchy. The Messiah would come in the line of David, as the New David. David's dad was Jesse. Jesse was a nobody. He had no royal blood. He was a shepherd. In fact, Jesse's great grandmother was Ruth. Ruth was a Moabite. So, Jesse's blood wasn't even entirely Jewish.) When our scriptures refer to the Root of Jesse, we understand them to indicate Jesus. Jesus is the branch that grows out of this inconsequential root. We humans get starstruck by David's glimmering royalty. We want our messiah to come from royal David, but, when we read about the root of Jesse, it's as if God is waving both hands saying, you value the glamor, but everything since David has been a shambles so I'm going to start back before the beginning, bringing the Prince of Peace who will make the peace that your royal military king was never able to produce or maintain. God's plan of salvation existed before David's royal bloodline and extends beyond it. God made it once and will make it again through all of us. No one group, religion, or race will restore God's design alone.

In Christ, one group is never safeguarded at the expense of another. Christ's peacemaking provides redemption for all of us. If we want to participate in this holy choir, we must follow our conductor in the work of righteousness through securing justice and making peace. It starts with our own hearts. We must identify our own prejudice and bias; we all have them. We must search for the divisions we feel and believe are justified. We can ask ourselves where we expect comfort and privilege without fighting for the same for others? We can consider what part we are uniquely called to sing. It's easy to follow the melody line, but maybe there's a time when we are called to provide tension through dissonance.

Our best participation in this holy choir is to learn our part, sing it confidently, honor the voices around us, and follow the conductor.....May we be a people who live in harmony with one another, glorifying God together with one voice as peacemakers.