

Advent 2A 12-5-10  
Matt 3:1-12, Romans 15:4-13  
Pastor Tim Koester

## Harmony

*(Children's time with harmonica or wooden train whistle, talking about harmony, dissonance, and "harmos" = joint. End with everyone holding hands perhaps singing a harmony)*

*Oh little town of Bethlehem....*

**PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT**

*How still we see thee lie.....*

**YOU BROOD OF VIPERS, WHO WARNED YOU TO FLEE FROM THE WRATH TO COME?**

*Above thy deep and dreamless sleep....*

**HIS WINNOWING FORK IS IN HIS HAND AND THE CHAFF HE WILL BURN WITH UNQUENCHABLE FIRE!**

Anybody else wondering what in the world is going on this morning? I thought we were supposed to be getting ready for Christmas, you know- expecting a nice, loveable, peaceful, happy holiday with a baby and cute little angels. [Where is our beautiful harmony?](#) Why is this grumpy mountain man sounding a foul note in our lullaby for Jesus?

It happens every year this way. The readings for Advent always have us hear from John on our way to see Jesus and as strange as it sounds, there is a point to the whole thing. As we prepare for Jesus -as we **expect** God to live among us today as the Word made flesh- [God also expects something to happen in us.](#)

God expects repentance, that is God expects lives that are **turned around**, focused on serving others, and welcoming to those who think they have no place before God. John warns us that preparing the way for Jesus involves the **deconstruction** of [old habits and beliefs](#) about how God works in the world. That is exactly what the apostle Paul is trying to get across to the Romans when he urges them to live in harmony with one another despite the differences that exist between traditional Jewish believers and the new gentile converts.

[But harmony is a lot easier said than done](#), especially between those who have a long and cherished history within a place and those who have come on the scene more lately. Such was the case in many first century churches (and especially in Rome) as people struggled to incorporate new, non-Jewish (gentile) believers into a religious system that had very deep Jewish roots. [Just how "traditional" were these converts supposed to be anyway?](#) Shouldn't they be required to honor the customs people of God had always practiced?

It's hard to imagine the radical changes those first century believers experienced. People were being asked to totally rethink "*how things had always been done*" and that can be a very difficult and scary proposition. Centuries-old religious ideas about what to eat, what to drink, or what days one should consider holy were being challenged by the radical openness of the gospel message. In one sense, both Jew and Gentile were being asked to leave behind their "religion" and [instead focus on one another](#) even if that meant giving up on some cherished beliefs or some new ideas.

Paul's challenge to the church in Rome, [the challenge to live in harmony](#) with one another despite differences of opinion and experience, [continues to call us to repentance even today](#). You would think that with 2000 years of history, we would have learned to play our music a little better but [differences still sound notes of dissonance](#) instead of chords of harmony and our determination to bend others to our way of thinking continues to cause the whole body to be out of joint.

If we were to list all of the things that have caused dis-harmony in the church over the years, I'm afraid we might have to order in lunch today... maybe for the next week! Some of the loudest discord has come from attempts to do just what Paul suggested to the Romans, "Welcome one another just as Christ has welcomed you". Well Christ welcomes us just as we are with no strings attached. Are we really supposed to do the same for everybody else?

Well YES we are... and that has been the driving force behind all kinds of controversial 'welcoming' in the church including the welcoming of gentiles, the welcoming of different races and nationalities, of women, and children, and those with physical or mental challenges, and most recently those who have a same-gender sexual orientation.

Each of these have caused difficulty and disharmony within the church but the communities that find a way to **resolve** the discord, [do so by staying focused on repenting of their own ways and seeking instead the good of their neighbor](#). The undeserved gift of God's grace causes us to turn our focus **outward** rather than inward and only a few verses before today's reading in Romans, Paul has this to say about arguments over whether to eat food sacrificed at pagan temples:

Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. [Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God](#). Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; ... Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself [but took on our own insults.]

How many times has the work of God been destroyed by our desire to please ourselves instead of our neighbor? Even small issues like "what color should we paint the Sunday School room" has left members of Christ's body at odds with one another for years. [In fact, sometimes those more local disagreements cause more division than any other](#).

That potential for dis-harmony exists for us as we consider possible changes to our worship space. Despite not hearing from anyone personally, I am beginning to sense anxiety and discontent but if we focus on the reality of Christ living among us, we can work through our differences **without** [causing the good work of God to be destroyed among us](#).

That starts with not jumping to conclusions about the motives of one another. [We must not let left-over power struggles from previous issues interfere with the current discussion](#). Unlike the popular culture of "us" against "them", [we must not take sides against one another](#). We are called by God to be different. [We put the needs of others ahead of our own](#). The Spirit of God helps us bear fruit worthy of repentance, which is mutual love for God and for one another.

So as we proceed together let us be open to wherever God leads us. Let us be open and honest in our conversations and use speech that builds up rather than speech that tears down. In thinking about what is we should or shouldn't do, [let us consider](#) not what is best for us but [what is best for our mission of growing, following, and connecting](#) others to **Jesus** and his work.

In the end, the most important thing is not whether we install a video screen here or there... or if we move the statue or if it remains where it is... or if we do nothing at all. The most important thing is [that we do not for the sake of appearances, destroy the work of God among us](#). God has blessed us with a story to tell and given us the resources to help many, many people. Let us seek God's will in discerning how to best go about that work.

Harmony is only possible when we take our fingers out of our ears and begin listening to our neighbor. In fact when a singer want to 'harmonize' better with others, he or she will often cup their hand behind their ear so that they can not only hear their neighbor but also hear the sound coming out of their own mouth. [Listening is also the most important part of any conversation](#). Through that connection, that joint, God works to bring our various melodies together, blending them into something much more rich and meaningful than our individual notes.

Let us go out today expecting God to be among us, changing us, challenging us, and urging us to more fully prepare ourselves and the world, for his coming among us. Amen.