

Sermon: Spokane Friends Church – May 19, 2024

‘The Beauty of Dissonance’

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James 4:1-11

Quaker Psalm #5: ‘I Saw God’s Great Love’

One of the two songs lots of kids first learn at the piano – usually from their big brother or sister – is “Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater” or “Chopsticks”. Chopsticks is that crazy little piece that starts with jackhammer sets of three repeated intervals: seconds, then thirds, then sixths, finally reaching an octave that brings us back to the original interval of a second. It begins and ends with the annoying little interval of a second – two notes in a scale, so close together that they clash! They need someplace to go! And they do – they resolve into a third... That harmonic, lovely interval of a third that we recognize as a welcoming doorbell chime... “ding dong”. Chopsticks might seem to say that in spite of our wont for order and beauty, we often begin and end our days with chaos, disorder, dissonance. The lovely spread of eight notes – the octave – leads us right ‘round to that horrid little second. What does Chopsticks have to tell us about life?

It exposes the truth. The harsh, jarring reality of life. **The truth of life holds conflict.** As much as we’d like to ignore it, stuff it, turn and run from it, conflict is a part of life. Facing those jarring places, those cruel realities, those dissonances in our lives, helps us to discover the source of our concern. Working through them helps us find out what truly matters. When we hear Chopsticks for the 49th time it’s easy to shout, “I never want to hear that song again!” At first, it was intriguing, but now it’s become maddening. What was at first a little ditty we could bat away, is now a drone that moves through the very bones of our being.

Whatever could be beautiful about dissonance? About a clashing interval? In any major scale [do re mi fa so la ti do] there are two ‘natural’ seconds – between mi fa and ti do]. Chopsticks begins on mi fa and *leads us on* to the rest of the piece. Ti do is another second that *leads us all the way back* to... Do. **Home!** Julie Andrews taught us all about this ages ago in The Sound of Music. Remember? ‘*Do a deer, a female deer. Re, a drop of golden sun... That will bring us back to Do.*’

“Ti” is called the **Leading Tone**... the Seventh Scale Degree – 123456**7** – “**7**” is a scary place to be. You’re hanging there for dear life. You’re stuck. You’ve gone all the way you can possibly go, and there’s no way left but down... or *up*! This

place of dissonance, chaos, exhaustion, has led you to a choice... return? Or resolve???

We are given a choice – you and I. Whether it be in our families, in our friendships, in our politics, in our world... in desperate places, we have a choice. Do we return to despair and desperation? Or does this dissonance sound a *leading tone* that moves us on? **The beauty of dissonance is its *potential*. What could it lead to?**

I taught music to a bunch of kids that *could not sing*! It was frustrating, disheartening, and I was so discouraged. I spoke to a Master Teacher at a convention where he was presenting. He asked me about my school, my kids, their families, etc. I taught music in Spokane at Regal Elementary in Hillyard. He guessed correctly that a majority of my students would have rarely heard lovely sound, beautiful music, attended concerts but more likely would have watched a lot of television, heard harsh sounds, etc. He challenged me to expose them more and more to beautiful sound. This opened me up even more to my kids and their environment away from school, and gave me a new idea! *The kids themselves would be the beautiful sound they needed to hear.* With permission from the staff and parents, I immediately began a Select Choir, auditioning children (they had to sing Happy Birthday) to see what kids if any could sing in tune, and formed a very small choir of kids who COULD sing! They sang at lunch time, they sang at every program, etc. That choir grew and grew and grew. They had to miss free breakfast once a week, and they had to get there on time. And they did – and they ate – at home! Making beauty was not only important to me – it became important to those kids and their families, and the school.

Sometimes, dissonance doesn't end. Instead, that chaos finds a life of its own, and the whole choir – the whole world – seems to sing out of tune. The Letter of James has a bit to tell us – those whose lives are set apart in God, and to whom the world looks on with scrutiny – about resolving this chaos. Communities of faith are being challenged to be wise in their behavior and discernment, to be strengthened and transformed, and to move forward in acts of love. In these things, they and we can be witnesses to the world of a way toward resolution of discord.

Let's take a look at James 4:1-11. "Where do conflicts and disputes come from?" James hits us with this solid query, and then a series of very personal questions right away. Cravings, covetousness, double-mindedness, speaking evil of others, and more. They're not about world history, international relations, political

differences, financial intrigue, family disputes... or *are* they? They all redound to personal pride. He asks the church – and us - to take a look at *ourselves*. He brings us all back to “Do”. To “Home.” Verse 5: “Do you suppose that the Scripture means *nothing* when it says, “God *yearns* jealously for the Spirit that he has made to dwell in us? *But he gives all the more grace*. So as the Scripture says, “God opposes the haughty, but gives grace to the humble.”

Yes – you have incredible hopes, desires, struggles, disappointments, disputes. But you also have great pride and self-interest. *You have a choice*. Arrogance or humility. A closed mind and heart, or openness to God’s grace. James is calling them to surrender. To move from dissonance to discovery. To recognize God’s spirit yearning to dwell in their hearts, and for these people *and us* to know God’s grace and goodness. And it happens through humility.

I’m sure James knew, God knows, and so do we, that this work is *work*. It takes a bit of time to move hearts and minds – especially our own, let alone *others*. A major scale can take a long time to learn, especially if you’ve never tried to play one before, and when you have to learn the *fingering*... Oh my! Learning how to move your thumb under the rest of your hand to play it smoothly... Getting from Do to Ti and on to Do... It isn’t easy. Piano students *always* dread the scales. And you have to learn them in so many keys!

And so my friends, when we hear that first, sometimes obnoxious repetitive sound of Chopsticks, do we rage against the seconds and sevenths in our lives that drive us to distraction, or do we celebrate the challenges they bring? Do we see the *potential* that dissonance gives us to launch out of these uncomfortable places? Do we examine our own spirits and hearts, and determine whether we will sink back into insular selfishness, or move forward, seeking healthy resolution with humility? Do we stay stuck on that 7th in clanging bitterness or do we release ourselves and perhaps others, and resolve into vibrant harmony? Do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti????

We can do this, through God’s grace. Do!