

SERMON FOR THE GOLDEN RULE AND CHURCH MUSIC SUNDAY
(2nd Sunday of Luke, October 4, 2020)

Today is the Second Sunday of Luke, in which we read in Luke's Gospel, Ch. 6:31-36. In this chapter of his Gospel, St Luke tells about how crowds gathered to hear Jesus teach, and he taught them what we know today as the Beatitudes, and also the "Golden Rule": "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you."

Today is also the Sunday in which the Greek Orthodox churches in America honor the chanters and choir members. It is "Church Music Sunday." We especially honor St Romanos the Melodist and the many other composers of the beautiful music which we chant today in worship and in honor of the Theotokos and of all the saints.

It is interesting to think of both of these subjects together, in terms of musical harmony. The ancient Greek philosophers taught about the harmony of the universe. They believed that the planets and stars made sounds that we on Earth cannot hear. These sounds constitute a "harmony" (*harmonia*) in the universe, so that the sounds of the heavenly bodies were in harmony, just as the planets and stars move in a harmonious fashion through the sky.

The idea that we cannot hear the supposed sounds of the planets is not entirely fanciful. The fact is that there are many sounds in this world which we human beings cannot hear. For example, elephants communicate in very deep notes which are pitched too low for the human ear. On the other end of the scale, dogs and other animals can hear sounds which are too high for us to hear; and I think that coyotes and other animals, like whales and dolphins, can howl and sing very high notes which go above the scale that we can hear, but which they can hear.

All of this suggests that the world is meant to sing in harmony. The Psalms teach about how the Earth itself sings in praise to God: the mountains, the seas, the stars, and all that exists, praises God. There are many Psalms about this: for example, Psalm 66 ("Make a joyful noise to God") and Psalm 98 ("Let the hills sing for joy together"). Our purpose is to join them in praise to the Creator.

Early Christians, then, taught that we human beings are intended to live in harmony with one another and with all the Earth. This is the point of Jesus' teachings about how we should treat others. It is also the point of the reading which we heard today from St. Paul to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 6:16-18, 7:1) in which he says that we are temples of the living God; therefore, we ought to live holy and decent lives. In other words, we are to be in harmony with God, and therefore within ourselves, and with other people, and ultimately with the whole universe.

What happens when we are not in harmony with the people or things around us? If we sing off-key, or shout, or condemn other people? [*At this point one of the little girls in the congregation covered her ears.*] That's right! If we are on the wrong note, or shout at one another, it is not a pleasing sound and we have to cover our ears. That is why Jesus teaches us to love one another and to do good to them, even if they are not good to us.

What happens if someone can't sing? Sometimes people say that they cannot sing at all. Then, we can tell them to make a joyful noise to the Lord! Sometimes that is how my chanting sounds.

But if we are joyful, God does not mind whether we are on the right note or not. In fact, being joyful *is* the right note.

How do we learn to be in harmony with one another? Many years ago, when I was a student at the University of Texas, I sang in a choir. I remember that the director told the men—tenors, baritones and basses—to listen to each other. He told us to cover our right ear, and to listen to the person on the left, and to match their note. Then we covered the other ear, and listened to the person on the right. Apparently the women were already in tune with one another; I don't think he had to tell them to do this. But in any case, we had to learn to sing in harmony with the person next to us, so that the whole choir would sound harmonious.

Before that, when I was in middle school, I played in an orchestra. Our school orchestra was about to take part in a big competition between the orchestras of middle schools from four states. To prepare for this, all of the children wanted to play really fast and impressive music. But our director told us that every orchestra would try to do that, and that it would be really hard for anyone to be successful at it. We would not fool the judges, who would know that much of the time we were just faking the notes. So, she gave us music which her husband, a well-known composer, had written especially for us. This orchestral piece had only whole notes. We students were really disappointed. We groaned that it would be no fun. But the director told us that if we could learn to play in harmony with each other, we would do better than all the other schools.

It turned out that she was right. For months, we practiced just getting on the same note. Then we played the harmonies of whole notes. The result was that our little orchestra took first prize over all the orchestras of four states. That was simply because we had achieved harmony with one another.

It is not always possible to play or sing in harmony with some people. Sometimes, if someone is unkind to us, we might find that we cannot sing with them. We can walk away; but we do not have to shout at them. This would disturb the harmony in ourselves, and probably they would not change very easily anyway. We can try to teach them the right notes, and see if it works. Otherwise, we walk away and look for where people really are singing—that is, living—in harmony with one another. This is what St. Paul means in his letter to the Corinthians, in which he says that as Christians, sometimes we have to “come out from among them,” that is, leave a group of people who are not praising God with their lives or their words. As for ourselves, we do not want to disturb the inner harmony which God intends for us. This is the peace of Christ, which is beyond our understanding, and which comes from the Holy Spirit.

Today I want to thank the chanters and everyone for the beautiful singing here. It is especially wonderful to see children joining in with the chanters. Thank you! And may the Holy Spirit create beautiful music in us, so that our lives make a pleasing sound to God and to one another and to all the world.