

## ***Tradition: Chord, discord and service***

(Sermon by Craig E. Tenke May 29, 2005)

This is Memorial Day weekend. It's a time to remember those who gave their lives for our great nation. A time to remember the strength and faithfulness of those we knew and loved, as well as those we owe so much to, but never knew. It is a time to show our respect for those national values that are worth dying for, those shared values on which our individual and corporate lives as Americans are strung. It is a time to remember and rekindle those ***shared traditions*** that continue to unite and strengthen us as a nation, and to remind us all of the importance of ***servicing others*** for the common good.

As Americans and as Christians, we ***also*** have a strong commitment to ***diversity***. As ***Christians***, we know that there are many gifts, but the same Spirit, for we are all part of the one body. We have the ***moral, religious, and civic responsibility*** to use these different gifts appropriately. As ***Americans***, we pride ourselves in being a ***melting pot*** of different peoples and cultures, and we are willing to suffer great hardships to secure ***liberty and justice for all***. Yet our history, both as Americans and as Presbyterians, tells us that ***the path to a meaningful and lasting unity is not an easy one***. Democracy takes dedication to make it work.

In music, pairs of notes that are pleasing to the ear can either have very different frequencies, or they can be multiples of each other. They can form chords. On the other hand, if notes are too close together, like B and B-flat, they ***clash*** with each other. The dissonant sounds beat against each other unpleasantly. ***Dissonance can also serve as a metaphor*** to help us understand how differences that are ***really quite small*** can get in the way of unity, even to the point of causing people with ***almost everything*** in common to become passionately at odds with each other. Traditions, too can either blend or clash. Maybe, just maybe, if we ***recognize*** how ***we*** react to ***each other***, our traditions will better preserve and support our relationships with God and nation.

Consonance and dissonance; concurrence and discord; compliance and dissent...

I want to start at the very beginning, not with history or theology or politics, but rather with the kind of direct and personal experience that most of us can appreciate:

The sun rises over the ocean on a warm and misty morning. Light slowly transforms the dark and the hidden into the revealed and the known. Colors drift over the horizon and into the hazy sky. Gulls take to the sky in search of food. Those awake to see it absorb the experience, more than watch it, active participants on a living stage sculpted from the earth, sea and sky. At times like these, it's hard *not* to feel the connection between *yourself* and *all that is seen and unseen*. You may intuitively grasp this connection, and *feel* the significance of the psalmists words:

“This is the day which the LORD has made;  
let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

This psalm *doesn't* quote doctrine or law, but rather *sings a prayer of thanksgiving* from the core of our very humanness, weaving it into a direct experience through the eyes of faith. This kind of direct experience of the sacred *predates and foreshadows our traditions*. It preceded Christianity, preceded Judaism, preceded civilization itself. It comes from the core spirituality on which all faith and religious traditions rest. The single note that it strikes rings clear and true, with no distortion... at least for a while....

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Rather than beginning with religious or political traditions, I want to share a *personal* experience of how *similarity, rather than difference*, can provoke discord. My example comes from a place where you might not expect to find it - the notoriously logical, hard-nosed world of science.

Science builds theories and models based on reproducibility and explanatory value. It also relies on an empirical rule called *parsimony*: whenever two or more alternatives exist, you *must* choose the least complicated one. Using this approach, the engine of science tends to increase our knowledge slowly, in *small, conservative steps*, where errors are corrected over time as long as *critical questions are continuously and faithfully pursued*. A scientist must be true to *both* the *method* and the *parsimony* of science, never replacing the predictions of an existing, but rough model with something weaker or untestable.

One *very human* problem with the science is that it aims at organizing things that may not be understood for *generations*, even though the method itself requires the *faithful labors* and creative investments of *individuals*. Each scientist must stand on the collective shoulders of those who came before. Each new discovery *must* be expressed in the context of what has already been established. Remember, the law of gravity didn't disappear when Einstein rephrased some very basic questions, and  $E=mc^2$  is just an understated equation without the *technology-driven* science of places like the Brookhaven National Laboratory. With all these constraints, how do you keep scientists *motivated* to do “*good*” science... even when well-considered tests produce inconclusive results?

Although the empirical engine of science is resistant to ideology in the long run, scientists themselves live and work somewhere in the middle of the story, and in a demanding world. Nobody likes to be proven wrong, but *critical* questioning, even *self-questioning*, is crucial to science. On the other hand, much of science happens in the fuzzy boundaries *between disciplines*, for example, between neuroscience and clinical medical practice. Good, hard-edged science and tentative soft-science may sometimes be hard to tell apart. Moreover, if the *limitations of new methods* aren't adequately understood, there's the possibility that a whole subdiscipline may ultimately find that they've just been interpreting technical measurement errors. This possibility is *so horrible* to someone who considers themselves to be a hard-nosed scientist that they sometimes feel compelled to critique “bad science” with an almost *religious fervor*. The curious *side-effect* of this is that *conventional wisdom* becomes transformed into *doctrine*.

Recently, a colleague and I discovered a simple, but useful, methodological wrinkle that was both untraditional and counterintuitive. Our conclusions went against the grain of the conventional wisdom of the field, as well as the recommendations of generations of experts. To be honest, it took *us* many years of experience and testing before we were convinced enough to publish it. Recently, though, *another* researcher, one who is quite well-published on these methods, felt the need to rail against us in print while discussing his own findings. Although we were puzzled by the way that he misrepresented what we actually said, the *most* amazing thing was that *his own figures* showed precisely what we had predicted, but he somehow couldn't see it! It appears that it's a lot easier to become *righteously indignant*, or even *enraged*, by heresy than it is to critically reevaluate your *own* decisions - particularly when you're certain that the issue was settled *long* ago.

What was the reason for this particular problem? Our approach wasn't intended to be a revolutionary. We were faithful to the history of the method, and expressed our findings in context. We didn't attack the other researcher's work. Quite simply, his rage was triggered by the very possibility that the *faith* he had placed in his traditional notions about things that were *dear* to him may somehow have been *misplaced*. Our paper simply rang out a *discordant* note, one that was *just a little bit different* than what he was prepared for.

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Today's scripture readings deal *directly* with faith and tradition. In fact, the Deuteronomy reading is a *mandate* for devotion and fidelity to God, as well as for using *religious traditions* to bring us closer to God. Jesus' two great commandments, on which all the law and the prophets are based, powerfully express the same thing. However, the way that Jesus was received by the religious authorities shows us that *even our best preserved traditions* can sometimes *stand in the way* of our relationship with God and man. Today, even as in Jesus' time, words of hope that are spoken by the faithful are scrutinized skeptically by other believers, whose differing backgrounds and discernment place them just a little bit apart. How can we really be sure that the *"image"* of God that *we* hold sacred isn't simply *an idolatrous elevation* of our own traditions, or worse, our personal preferences? Who are the *true* believers, and who are the *false prophets*? How are we to differentiate *"us"* from *"them?"* Is it right or is it wrong to even try?

Whenever populations become isolated or separated, there are drifts in language, culture and faith traditions. When the populations meet again, the differences may be discordant. Some differences are quite inconsequential, like minor key changes sung by a moderately-trained soloist singing *a cappella*. Dissonance only occurs when the soloist is called on to sing a duet. Yet while some differences are benign, others *are* malicious and heretical. There are a *few* who work in science who are *consistently* sloppy and uncritical in their methods, even though their work may not only seem adequate, but brilliant to those outside the field. They usually survive by publishing in low-ranking journals, but sometimes they can generate enough interest among interdisciplinary or clinical collaborators to pass themselves off as “authorities” for way too long.

In the case of religious faith, another degree also exists beyond this: the malice and infidelity can be *intentional*. For example, when the Roman Catholic Church became the dominant political power of medieval Europe, so-called “satanists” *purposely distorted* traditional practices into a parody that was designed to strike the faithful with spiritual discord and make them spontaneously cry out, “*It’s just wrong!*” While such obvious heresies may still exist, their political basis is by-and-large irrelevant in today’s world. Possibly of greater significance is the possibility that *fragments* of these distorted traditions can become fused with misinformation or pop culture in a way that bring harm to the ignorant. As an example, my daughter told me about a peculiar statement of faith she read online that was written by a 15 yr old, self-proclaimed “satanist.” In it, the kid explained that he couldn’t believe in a God who was responsible for plagues, disasters, and human suffering. He cried out against a God who could kill one who was blameless, let alone His own child. “*This just can’t be the one, true God!*” Curiously, this kid was asking all of the *right* questions, the kinds of questions that *all* faithful Christian must confront at some time in their lives. We must be challenged and instructed by the trials of life so that we can come to a deeper and more mature faith. Moreover, these questions were *important* to him. Other statements verified a confusion on his part between medieval Catholicism and Christianity, and a complete absence of information about the Protestant Reformation, let alone any recent theological debates. In short, *it was ignorance, not dissonance*, that separated him from the faithful. (Then again, he didn’t name me personally in a scientific paper.)

My point here *isn't* that there is no such thing as malice or heresy, but simply that Christians need to seek *discernment* when we try to *discriminate between* those traditions that bring us *closer to God*, and those that *replace Him* with something else in our hearts. After Luke's version of the second reading, Jesus is challenged with the question, "*Who is my neighbor?*" Jesus' answer was the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. As you probably know, Samaritans weren't idolatrous pagans, but rather just a subpopulation whose traditions had undergone some cultural drift. As a result of these differences, Jews and Samaritans did their best to stay out of each other's way. "*Make a joyful noise to the Lord?*" No, the Samaritans were more of a *shrill, mocking noise* to the cultured ears of Jerusalem. Right is right, and they just weren't! But objectively, were they really all that different, at least in spiritual terms? In fact, weren't they *just different enough* for their traditions to be dissonant?

"Who *is* my neighbor?"

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Our traditions tie us to lives and events that are much broader and enduring than our own. There's also comfort and security in tried and true traditions. Our American traditions are, quite literally, *imprinted* on our personalities. Yet, traditions should nurture and focus our relationships to God and man, without becoming automatic or an end in themselves. With this in mind, I invite you to consider how history and experience interact in tradition, along the sometimes fuzzy line between faith and idolatry.

Before the hurricane of '38 passed over this church, my grandparents brought my mother here. They were newcomers to a congregation that was already two centuries old. The denomination of which it was a part just happened to have been founded on the principle of "constitutional republicanism" at a time when its own government was arguably the most powerful intercolonial organization on the continent. Through this church, their *great-grandchildren* inherited a direct link to the Revolutionary War, which was known in some quarters as "the Presbyterian Rebellion"

I grew up proud of being a Presbyterian. We had strong, American traditions and a clear awareness of God, but *we* weren't superstitious or uninformed. In a conservative, rural township with only one political party, I was raised hearing the grumblings of elders about issues ranging from our denomination's stand on Angela Davis to all of the "fifty cent words" that Chuck Cozadd used in his sermons. One of these sermons was based on Jean Paul Sartre's play, "No Exit," an atheist's portrayal of hell as "other people" that somehow was reshaped into a paradox of faith and hope in my young mind. I learned that, ever and always, *our God is alive and well* in a world of ever-increasing complexity, and I came to think of the *real "Law of God"* - not *words about* God, but rather the "*living Word* of God" - as no less concrete than the law of gravity.

In the cold war era, my spiritual life was cultivated by a congregation that included technicians, engineers and scientists among the priesthood of believers. The congregation was, and still is, family - both literally and metaphorically. I learned hard lessons about our stewardship of the earth by playing down the creek, where snapping turtles, big enough to carry off wheelbarrows, used to rule the muck we called "quicksand," and the supernatural sounds of whip-poor-wills owned the firefly night. Long before cell phones, I was rarely too far away to be retrieved by a matronly holler. I learned that Jesus loves the little children, that we must love our neighbor as ourselves, that we must love and forgive our enemies. I learned these things under the threat of a nuclear mushroom cloud, mere miles from the Brookhaven National Lab. I learned them as I played in the shadow of nuclear warheads, ready to strike from secret sites nearby. I learned as I played under the sonic booms of Grumman's new war machines, built where they've since reassembled flight 800.

Through all of this, I held onto my pride as an American, arm-in-arm with my pride as a Presbyterian. And as I began to mature, I learned that to be an adult meant to accept the gap between moral *belief* and moral *action*. Only recently have I begun to seriously consider the possibility that the conservative, moral tension between what *is* and what *should* be, might *sometimes* just be an excuse to *not* follow Christ into the *difficult* places, places where a cross isn't just a clean, white symbol, but rather a place of *death*, where *we faithful followers* betrayed the innocent to crucifixion, and then just ran away. In fact, maybe, just maybe, *part* of my pride wasn't based so much my faith in either God *or* in liberty after all, but was rather a form of idolatry, an image carved in the form of myself, a stumbling block for a just and lasting peace, and an offense to the very Word of God.

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Each Memorial Day, after the parade through Center Moriches, there's a service at the war memorial in the cemetery. My father no longer introduces Mrs. James B.M. Bulloch to "pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States *of America*," but somehow I still managed to bring up another generation with the tradition. They began sitting in a big "Radio Flyer" wagon, waving their flags as the veterans and bands and fire engines paraded by. Each year, we remind them of the sacrifices made on our behalf by those who went before us, and by those who are still in jeopardy on foreign soil. Each year, we reflect on the meaning of America, and give thanks for the values we share in common with those whose different backgrounds and faiths collectively make up America. What the speeches lack in eloquence is made up for by the dedication of the dwindling numbers of those who go, year after year, to express their gratitude and respect through tradition.

Memorial Day is a day to recognize the sacrifices that have been made for our nation. It's also a reminder to each of us to rededicate *ourselves* to *service*. We remember and honor our fallen veterans for their sacrifice and their works, and we hold them up as an example for us all. Yet, even as the Lord has given us different gifts, so are there different forms of service.

And Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

May the traditions and reflections of Memorial Day be especially meaningful this year.

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scripture reading:

*Deuteronomy 6: 4-9*

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD;  
and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all  
your soul, and with all your might.

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart;  
and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of  
them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and  
when you lie down, and when you rise.

And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets  
between your eyes.

And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

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Matt.22 34-40

[34] But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sad'ducees, they came  
together.

[35] And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him.

[36] "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

[37] And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and  
with all your soul, and with all your mind.

[38] This is the great and first commandment.

[39] And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

[40] On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."

Sunday, May 29, 2005

Old Testament Lesson: Deut. 6: 4-9

New Testament Lesson: Matt. 22: 34-40

sermon: Tradition: Chord, discord and service

1<sup>st</sup> Hymn: What wondrous love is this (B85)

2<sup>nd</sup> Hymn: Morning has broken (B469)

3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn: O beautiful for spacious skies (B564)

4<sup>th</sup> Hymn: Here I am, Lord (B525)

Sat., May 28, 2005

Old Testament Lesson: Deut. 6: 4-9

New Testament Lesson: Matt.22 34-40

sermon: Tradition: Chord, discord and service

1<sup>st</sup> Hymn: What wondrous love is this (B85)

2<sup>nd</sup> Hymn: O beautiful for spacious skies (B564)