

Sermon for Sunday, September 12, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"WHEN YOUR PIANO IS OUT OF TUNE"

Ephesians 5:15-20

Text: "...singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart..."

--Ephesians 5:19

Our church has a contract with a piano tuner. About twice a year he comes to tune the various pianos in the building. Usually I try to find some good excuses to get out of the church on those days because he sounds like Johnny--One-Note. After a while that constant pinging on one note as he seeks to get the wires in tune can drive you crazy! Recently, when the tuner was here, his constant hammering of one note over and over began to get to me. However, as I began to think about it, it occurred to me that maybe it got on his nerves, too. So, I walked into the room where he was working and began to chat with him. Well, I learned something about pianos and tuning that I had never known--or at least had never thought of before. I want to share that secret with you this morning. And this is the secret: it is the tension that makes the melody. Without tension you get only a dull sound. In order for a note to be in tune, for it to make the proper sound, to have the right melody, it must have the right tension. If it has too little--or too much--tension, it is off key.

So, this morning I want to talk about the piano in our heart. Our text for this morning says that we should sing and make melody to the Lord with all of our hearts. But the melody some of us make this morning is off key. It is discordant and out of tune. So, I would like to share some thoughts with you on getting our hearts in tune. The first thing I want to talk about this morning is the source of our tensions. You see, life is always going to bring to us anxiety, fears, threats, and insecurities. Sometimes people think that if they could just change their environment or their jobs or their circumstances they could be happy. But the fact is, the source of our tensions is within. It is not so much what is happening in our lives as it is how we are responding to it. And our inner response to our world can do dreadful things to us. For example, many of our physical ailments are either caused by or aggravated by what is going on inside of us. Doctors tell us that migraine headaches, some forms of asthma, ulcers, hypertension, bad backs, heart attacks, some forms of skin irritations, obesity--and the Lord knows how many other ailments are at least in part the result of our inner response to tensions and conflicts in our world around us.

I have a friend who is unhappy in his job. By the time he gets home from work each day, the muscles in his neck and back have become tense and stiff. He usually comes home rubbing himself and saying, "That job is a pain in the neck." In a very literal sense, that is true. But it is not the job itself that causes him the pain, it is his own inner response to it. Do you remember Victor Hugo's story "93"? In this story, a sailing ship is caught in a terrific storm. At the height of the storm, when things are at their worst, the frightened crew suddenly hears above the wind and the waves an even more ominous sound. There is a terrible crashing sound below decks and instantly they know what has happened. A cannon they are carrying has broken loose. As the ship tosses from side to side, the cannon is sent rolling from first one side and then to the other of the ship. They know that the heavy weapon will soon smash its way through the side of the ship and the vessel will be lost along with their lives. Two men, at the risk of their own lives, go below and at last manage to get a rope around the cannon and secure it once more. It is a job that has to be done, for the danger from within is far more real and far more serious than the storm outside. And so it is with us. It is what is going on inside that is the more dangerous. And while the storms of life that assail us from without are

serious, the greater danger is from within--the greater danger is how we are responding to what is happening. An inner emotion gone wild, running rampant and unchecked within, can do far more serious damage to us. So the first point I want to make is that the real source of our tensions is our response to life far more than it is the circumstances of life.

Tied in with this is the second thing I want to say this morning, which is this: our problem is not so much tension, but the wrong sort of tension. As I mentioned earlier, in a piano string it is the tension that makes the melody. And so it is in life. Life must have tension, but it is the wrong kind of tension that gets us in trouble. A lot of people want to take the tension out of life today. We have become a nation that seems to live off of tranquilizers. We are told that more and more people are taking more and more tension-relieving drugs. As a matter of fact, the growing number of alcoholics and drug addicts is indicative of the fact that more and more people are trying to get away from life, trying to relieve tensions and pressures they can't live with or cope with. It is a form of escapism where, at least for a little while, a person does not have to face up to the reality of life. A young alcoholic, the son of a member when I pastored a church in Texas, once told me, "I drink and drink until a little switch inside of me suddenly clicks and then the tension is gone and the world is okay."

Yet, the fact is, without tension, life does not work very well. Absence of challenge can be a very terrible thing. What has made this country great? Is it not the fact that it faced stern and difficult challenges? Back during World War II the Army had a group of men known as the Construction Battalion, or the CB's. Their motto was, "The difficult we do immediately, the impossible takes a little longer." A piano string without tension makes no melody.

But, by the same token, too much tension is not good either. Recently I was trying to tune my guitar. As I tightened the string, I overdid it and suddenly the string broke with a loud twang. I've seen that happen to people, too! A part of my job as a minister is to work with people who are under too much pressure. And life does not work very well that way. Probably there have been times in the lives of each of us when we had more pressure than we could handle very well. We know what it is to be tense and anxious; we know what it is to be unable to sleep; we know what it is to be so tied in knots that we can't relax. No, too much tension isn't good either. And the thing that makes melody in a piano string is not the lack of tension, neither is it too much tension. Rather, the melody comes when there is the proper tension.

We have said two things. We have said that the source of our tension is within--our inner response to the world about us. We have said that the sort of tension is important--too little or too much tension brings discord. It is the right amount of tension that brings the melody. This brings me to the third thing I want to talk about which is the solution to tension. How do you keep tension in perspective in your life?

In our scripture for this morning St. Paul gives us two suggestions that grow out of a perspective on life. First, he says, "be filled with the Spirit." That is, let God control your life; let Jesus have your will; surrender your life to the control of God. That is, don't take yourself too seriously. When something goes wrong in your life or when some decision faces you or when some action is demanded, what do you do? Well, the fact is, most of us say things like, "What shall I do? How shall I act? What decision shall I make?" This was exactly the problem that faced the man in the parable that Jesus once told. The man had so much goods he didn't know what to do with them. He took himself too seriously. What he did became too

important. He said, "What shall I do?" And then, because he took himself so seriously, he answered his own question. He said, "I'll tear down my barns--I'll build bigger ones--I'll put all my goods there--and then I'll say to my soul, 'Soul, take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry, for you have much good laid up for many years.'" But Jesus said that was the wrong answer. Jesus said God had other plans for him because that night he would die.

So, as it turns out, "What shall I do?" is the wrong question. That puts the emphasis on self. And the real question is, "God, what would you have me to do?" Does that make sense? The real question isn't what you do, but what God wants to do through you. And once you know that--that God wants to act through you--you can never take yourself too seriously again.

The second suggestion that St. Paul gives us is not to take the world too seriously. Jesus once said that we shouldn't worry about the world--what to eat or drink or wear. And he went on to say that God cared about even an insignificant little sparrow so it would follow that he cared much more about us who are worth more than many sparrows. In our scripture for today St. Paul says, "...always and for everything giving thanks..." You see, when I know that God loves me, when I know that everything that happens to me and those whom I love is working out for good, then--no matter what happens--I can always and for everything give thanks. I don't take life too seriously; I don't let the things that happen get me down, because I know that in spite of the worst that life can do to me, God is at work bringing good out of it.

The flowers on the altar this morning were given in memory of a young girl who lost her life in an accident while mountain climbing. She was a beautiful person--a fine human being. How can we understand a senseless tragedy like that when a life is snatched away? Well, we can believe that in everything God is working for good. We may not understand it now--we may not see the pattern in it--but we trust God because we know he loves us. That way, you see, we don't take life and the things of life too seriously. Yes, we can sing and make melody in our hearts when we don't take ourselves too seriously because we are filled with the Spirit, and when we don't take the world too seriously because we know God is making everything work for our good.

Frances Fowler Allen tells the story of the Ugly Earrings. She writes, "Recently my husband was hospitalized with a serious illness, and I had to wait hours outside the intensive-care ward for each few minutes I was allowed in. To add to my worries, the other visitors were usually noisy and emotional. A woman sitting next to me was especially annoying. She was physically unattractive and overly made up. Her hair was dyed an improbable shade of red. While waiting, she would take off her shoes and stretch out in the chair, toes turned up, uttering irritating little sighs. She smoked continuously. Frostily, I discouraged her attempts at conversation. But one thing she did attracted my attention. When she was allowed in to see her husband she would take a pair of huge rhinestone earrings from her pocketbook and screw them on. I thought they were cheap looking and out of place." Mrs. Allen goes on to tell how the woman came out of the intensive care unit one night, tears streaming down her cheeks. Mrs. Allen was overwhelmed by the grief of the woman and forgot all the little things she didn't like about her. She asked if she could help. The woman replied, "There is nothing more to do. The doctor just told me that he won't get any better." "I'm trusting God," she said, as she unscrewed the rhinestone earrings. She held them in her hand a moment and then explained quietly, "They hurt my ears terribly, but he gave them to me. He likes to see them shining; in the dark." Her pocketbook closed on the glittering

rhinestones Mrs. Allen had considered so ugly. Then she realized, the woman could wear the ugly earrings because she didn't take herself too seriously; and she could handle her husband's impending death because she trusted God and didn't take the world too seriously.

And when life has done its worst to you and you can still trust God and wear ugly earrings, then your piano will be in tune and you can sing and make melody to the Lord with all your heart.