

Aurea Mediocritas/The Golden Middle *(Finding a Balance between Standards and Liberty)*

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

(1 Corinthians 8:2)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, **November 11, 2018**

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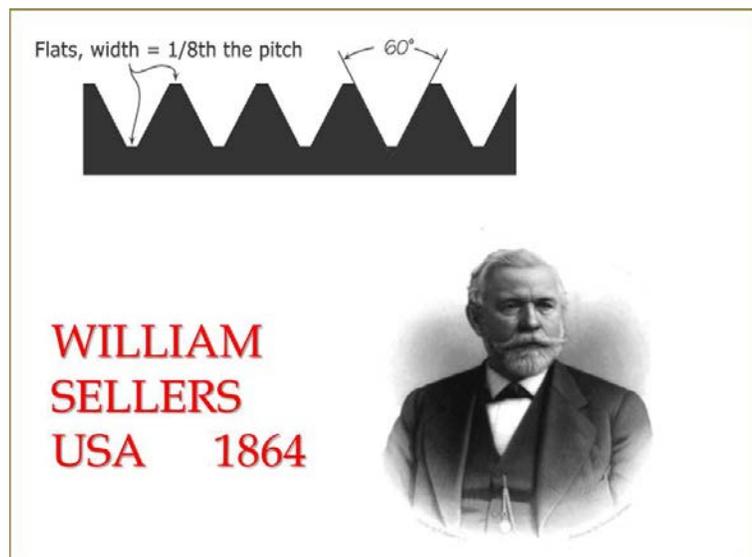
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Ours is a standardized world. A pair of jeans, 36 inch waist and 32 inch inseam, will fit just about the same whether made by Levi or Wrangler. A new CD from the smallest label in Sweden will sound as sharp in your car stereo as the latest release from Sony. It's called global standardization, without which there would be no mass production, no mass communication, and nothing vaguely resembling a modern economy.

According to the *National Institute of Standards and Technology*, a division of the U. S. Department of Commerce, there are now nearly a million global technological standards. Conditioned as we are to the modern world, that may not sound amazing, until we realize that we only need go back a century and a half to find a world economy powered by industries with very few technological standards.

Step into my homiletical time machine and travel with me now back 154 years to a very significant day in history, April 21, 1864. We're headed to the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia where we will hear a speech by a machinist and Philadelphia businessman, William Sellers. Citizens of Philadelphia didn't recognize it then, but this was the moment when the world economy would have its Kitty Hawk, soon to soar like an eagle upon the wings of technology,. The subject of William Sellers' speech? It was all about the humble screw.

Now, if you think this sermon is dry so far, wondering where I'm headed, listen to the exciting title of Seller's historic speech, "*On a Uniform System of Screw Threads.*" Advocating the adoption of a national standard, Sellers said, "*In this country, no organized attempt has as yet been made to establish any system, each manufacturer having adopted whatever his judgment may have dictated as the best, or as the most convenient for himself.*"



At that time American screws, nuts, and bolts were custom made with no guarantee that those made by shops on different streets, let alone different cities, would be the same. Sellers realized that the end of the hand-tooled machine age was nigh and that to continue without standards would retard economic progress. The tool industry's adoption of a standard, beginning with the screw, was to the last half of the 19th century what computer technology has been to the last half of the 20th century, our economy's most important driver of technological innovation.

To be sure, standards seem so "standard" to us today that it's hard to imagine a time without them. They play a consequential role in nearly every aspect of our lives, from the quality of our food to the octane of our gasoline. Standards introduce predictability into our lives, obviating routine decisions so that we can get on with our life without spending much time wondering at the gasoline pump if the product is being measured fairly, or worrying in the supermarket line if the can of mushroom soup we just placed in our cart will poison us. We expect standards to be met, those published on the pump or placed on the label of the can.

In 1864, though, not everyone had embraced standardization. Some wondered if standards would eliminate individuality and dull craftsmanship. One can understand why machinists in that day viewed standardization as a threat. Regarding themselves as craftsmen, they naturally regarded standardization as the first step down a slippery slope toward mediocrity. How dare anyone tell me how to make a screw? How dare they!

Still, Sellers' ideas won the day so that historians of technology point to his speech in Philadelphia as a watershed moment in American history, noting that had the screw not been standardized the course of the American economy might look much different.

Today there are myriad governmental and quasi-governmental agencies dedicated to establishing and preserving standards. Technological standards give us the ability to speak the same language. 2% milkfat. 24 karat. 1.6 gallons per flush. 8½ by 11. Three-ring binder. #2 lead pencil. 20/20 vision. USDA Prime. 87 octane. QWERTY.

Well, I suppose by now you've guessed where I'm headed. At the decree of the bishop all United Methodist sermons will henceforth be standardized, written by the home office and sent out on Mondays with the requirement that all clergy preach the same sermon, word for word.

I'm kidding, of course. My point is that, like those craftsmen machinists from the Civil War era of 1864, pastors would feel their individuality threatened by standardization, sensing that our ability to be innovative had been sacrificed in a search for a conformity which would surely give birth to mediocrity. How dare anyone tell me how to write a sermon? How dare they!

Now, I don't intend my sermon this morning to be a defense of individuality in sermon-making. No, but rather my message will seek to say something about the church's quest for unity around something much more important than the Sunday sermon, our search for unity in theological and social standards. The church has always been about this enterprise of defining our standards, doctrinally and theologically, to be sure, but also in the arenas of moral, ethical, and social

standards. Summed up, what are our standards of Head (how we think) and of Heart (how we live).

What things are absolutely necessary for one to be a part of the church? What things are essential? In what things must we all look alike, sound alike, think alike, and behave alike? Conversely, what things are left to liberty? In what is it okay for us not to look alike, not to sound alike, not to believe alike, not to behave alike?

I hardly need point out that these are the very issues facing denominations and local churches today. In what areas of doctrine and practice must standards be enforced and, what areas of doctrine and practice are left to liberty? Thus my subtitle, how do we achieve a balance of Standards and Liberty? That perfect balance would be, don't you think, *The Golden Middle* (Latin: *Aurea Mediocritas*).

To address that issue, Corinth seems an appropriate place for our next visit in my homiletical time machine. Leaving Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, we travel back another 1800 years to biblical Corinth. It was to the church in Corinth that Paul spoke of brotherly love, lifting up love over knowledge. *Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up.*

Perhaps no New Testament church struggled more with this issue of standards and liberty. What must be? What might be?

When he came to Corinth around 50 A. D., Paul altered the strategy of his missionary journeys. In this harbor city of Corinth, a major crossroads of cultures in the Mediterranean world, Paul settled down for 18 months, for the first time allowing the world to come to him.

These are the seven remaining pillars of Corinth's Temple of Apollo, which originally had 38 pillars. These are monolithic pillars, by the way, each a single piece of stone over 20 feet tall. These seven have survived the ravages of time and stand precisely in the place where they were erected in about 550 B. C., already 600 years old when the Apostle Paul, the tentmaker preacher, lived and worked here.



I've had the privilege on numerous occasions to stand here and teach. Very near this temple was the agora (marketplace) of this wealthy commercial center, one of the largest and most ornate in the ancient world, covered with marble slabs. Standing in that agora on my first trip I offered a devotional for our group about how Paul addressed the divisions within the ancient Christian community that lived, worked, played, and worshipped here.

With these pillars of the Temple of Apollo looming over us, I focused on 1 Corinthians 8 and the question the church faced about eating meat which had been offered to idols. The infant church, living in the midst of the long-revered Roman pantheon of gods, lacked any standardized opinion with respect to this practice. Meat which had been offered to idols could be taken to the agora and sold, but some in the church opted for a *Standard* of strict prohibition of this practice, feeling that the meat's connection with pagan gods had defiled it. Others, though, leaned toward *Liberty*, seeing nothing wrong with taking advantage of bargain basement prices on good meat.

Paul steered the church into a middle road, saying that while there is nothing inherently wrong with eating such meat, an idol being nothing in the world with no power to corrupt the meat, he still would choose not to flaunt his liberty, but rather to abstain. "*Take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block to the weak.*"

The church has always known this tension between conformity to standards on the one hand, and expression of liberty on the other. There are two realms where this tension arises: (1) the articles of our faith, where the tension is an intellectual one, and (2) behavioral standards, where the tension can rise rapidly as societal mores change, leading to emotionally-laden disagreements such as the church faces today in cultural shifts in its views of, for example, same-gender marriage. Well-meaning Christians are on both sides, some seeing in same-gender marriage a violation of a necessary standard, others seeing an expression of liberty.

The search for theological and behavioral standards is always present in every denomination and local church. Just as *technological standards* allow us to speak the same language, so *theological standards* allow the church to speak the same language. For example, we spoke this morning the same language when we affirmed our faith with the Apostles' Creed. Imagine each line of the creed as one of the thread on a theological screw, a screw which holds believers together into a community. Which lines of the creed are essential? Are any of the threads optional?

My title, *Aurea Mediocritas* is a Latin phrase meaning "*The Golden Middle.*" It points to the way of wisdom between extremes. Finding that *Golden Middle* between *Standards* and *Liberty* will keep us from the excesses both of rigid fundamentalism that would add threads to the screw and squishy liberalism that would take away virtually all standards.

With massive theological standardization we run the peril of becoming fundamentalists on the order of the theologically-obese Pharisees of Jesus' day, or the Taliban of our day. In his book *Gentle Thunder*, Max Lucado pokes a bit of fun at Christians for whom everything is a Standard with little room for Liberty – no middle ground allowed.

*Some time ago I came upon a fellow on a trip who was carrying a Bible.
"Are you a believer?" I asked him.
"Yes," he said excitedly.
I've learned you can't be too careful.
"Virgin birth?" I asked.
"I accept it."*

“Deity of Jesus?”

“No doubt.”

“Death of Christ on the cross?”

“He died for all people.”

Could it be that I was face to face with a Christian? Perhaps. Nonetheless I continued my checklist.

“Status of man.”

“Sinner in need of grace.”

“Definition of grace.”

“God doing for man what man can’t do.”

“Return of Christ?”

“Imminent.”

“Bible?”

“Inspired.”

“The church?”

“The body of Christ.”

I started getting excited. “Conservative or liberal?”

He was getting interested too. “Conservative.”

My heart began to beat faster.

“Heritage?”

“Southern Congregationalist Holy Son of God Dispensationalist Triune Convention.”

That was mine!

“Branch?”

“Pre-millennial, post-trib, non-charismatic, King James, one-cup communion.”

My eyes misted. I had only one other question.

“Is your pulpit wooden or fiberglass?”

“Fiberglass,” he responded.

I withdrew my hand and stiffened my neck. “Heretic!” I said and walked away.

Lucado is playfully showing how fundamentalism can degenerate into a hair-splitting mentality with a concentration on minutiae that misses the larger picture.

Yet, the opposite extreme, excessive tolerance, exposes the Christian community to a different sort of peril, that of eroding any standardized structure of belief and behavior in favor of tolerance of virtually anything. This, of course, eventually collapses the belief system, in effect reducing a faith community to something less than the New Testament Church, an assembly of the Unknowing gathered to celebrate the Unknowable. This goes against the grain of church history, for we are a creedal people with a standard of faith derived from a canon of scripture, the accepted touchstone allowing us to speak the same language.

Odd, isn't it, this paradox? In things technological, massive standardization, beginning with the screw, is an exciting lunge forward into unlimited potential. Conversely, in things spiritual, excessive theological standardization as well as its opposite – excessive liberalization – can lead to a stagnation of civility caused by the one with supposed knowledge imagining themselves to possess a knowledge lacking in others. Opposite poles, both with their vaunted knowledge – then butt heads. This seems increasingly our world, politically and socially.

Love is the only yoke I know of which can harness the energies of opposites and brings them into balance. May God grant us the wisdom to find the *Aurea Mediocritas*, in the days ahead for the United Methodist Church and for Christ of the Hills.

I am a traditionalist. My desire is for the church to maintain its views regarding same gender marriage and ordination. I see these as *Standards* and not as *Liberty*. At the same time, I love intensely those of my colleagues who see differently than do I, and certainly I love in pastoral way those in my churches, Christ of the Hills and all my past appointments, who place these things in the realm of liberty.

As a pastor, it's natural for me to yearn for us at Christ of the Hills to continue to be what we are, a vibrant church showing its aliveness in meaningful worship and fellowship and in extraordinary mission and ministry. That is my deepest desire.

I want to share a few paragraphs, in closing, of a statement made a decade ago by United Methodist Bishop Michael Conyer, *The Methodist Middle*:

I want to affirm the Methodist Middle, the great middle ground of middle-of-the-road United Methodist laity and clergy who are not part of either the vocal 'right' or 'left' groups that seem to be making all the news these days . . . those in the Methodist Middle value doctrine, but they do not use it like a club to beat their opponents (such as the far right do), nor do they simply choose to ignore doctrine when it interferes with their personal preferences (like those on the far left do). Those in the Methodist Middle value Scripture, but they are not for rigid literalism, nor do they simply ignore scripture when it fails to support their personal preferences . . . Unlike the far right and the far left, they do not believe that they have the only answers to every issue that confronts us today . . .

Those in the Methodist Middle are NOT in the middle-of-the-road trying to avoid issues. They are trying to find a Third Path by centering their life and faith on Jesus Christ, and they believe in the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit to guide and direct their lives and their church . . . Are you part of the Methodist Middle? I am, and I believe that 70 to 90 percent of all United Methodists are. Perhaps it is time for the Methodist Middle to be heard.

