

Ducks:  
Thursday Morning Email Devotion for November 2, 2023

Aloha MPC ‘Ohana,

Although it’s been a while now, the last time Nan and I were on the Big Island, we went to find King Kamehameha’s statue in Hilo. We found the King in a park near Hilo Bay, not far from a placid, slow-morning river which snakes its way through the heart of the park.

There were ducks in the river that day. And shortly after Nan and I arrived, evidently a couple of those ducks must have disagreed about something. Because all of a sudden, loud squawking and honking erupted from two ducks as they snapped their bills aggressively at each other and flapped their wings furiously. It was quite the battle royale.

For all of a minute (or maybe less). Because it was over as quickly as it started. The two ducks swam away from each other, spent just a few minutes apart, and by the time Nan and I had taken a few pictures of his Majesty, the two ducks were back to paddling along beside each other as if they’d never been upset with one another at all. Had Nan and I arrived at the park at that moment, in fact, we never would’ve known the two ducks had just had a fight. There was no sign of it at all.

I heard an ornithologist say once that ducks and other birds can fight fiercely like that, and then quickly forget about it and move on with life together, because of their small “bird brains.” This ornithologist said that ducks just don’t have enough gray matter in their heads to remember to stay mad at each other. Their brains lack the capacity to hold a grudge for very long, in other words.

We human beings are blessed (and cursed) by much bigger brains. Our big brains are a blessing to us in ways too numerous to count. It was we homo sapiens with our big brains, after all, who put a man on the moon, not the ducks. It’s truly amazing what incredible things a species can do with a big brain. It’s amazing what good and beautiful things a big brain can conceive (just listen to Mozart or read Shakespeare sometime).

But if our big brains have a downside (and they do have several, actually), one of those downsides is the ability to remember when we’ve had a tiff or a cross word with someone else. The ability even to remember that disagreement for a very long time, and to hold onto any feelings of antipathy which it may have engendered. And that does not always serve us well.

Think about some of the places in the world where one group of people has a long, deep-seated historical enmity toward another group. Places like the Middle East, for example. Some of the grievances and grudges in that part of the world

are literally thousands of years old. Because people remember, and they just won't let go of their ill will toward their "enemies," even after a hundred generations.

At a presbytery committee meeting long ago in another part of the world, a younger, brasher version of me got into an argument once with another pastor. We crossed swords about a theological controversy, tempers flared, and harsh words were spoken in the heat of the moment.

Afterwards, I felt badly about that, so I went to apologize to my colleague. "I'm sorry," I said, "I let my temper get the better of me."

He smiled graciously. "I did too," he said, "but it's okay. 'Iron sharpens iron'."<sup>1</sup>

I not only appreciated his willingness to forgive and move on. I also appreciated his Biblically-informed perspective on the disagreement itself. He saw it as an opportunity to have his own thinking sharpened by being challenged by someone (me) who had a different perspective. And so, from that time on, although we didn't always agree with each other about certain subjects, we knew we were friends, and we respected the way we each challenged each other to think harder and clearer – more sharply – about important matters.

I think of that old friend of mine, particularly on days like All Saints Day. Because he joined the Church Triumphant a few years ago. I remember him as a man who blessed me by disagreeing with me from time to time. Because whenever he did, he made my mind sharper. And yet, at the same time, he also helped me remember to make my heart softer. And so I remember my friend fondly for blessing me in both of those ways, with thanksgiving to God for him.

Me ke aloha,  
Pastor Ron

---

<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 27:17