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17:20-26

John

US AND THEM

A few years ago in a move that really vaulted him from moderate success to full-on superstar, the host of the Daily Show, comedian Jon Stewart, went on CNN's debate show *Crossfire* to hit the hosts, Tucker Carlson and Paul Begalia, with a suggestion. That suggestion was...stop. Stop hurting America, to be exact. Stewart then went on a 10 minute discourse with the hosts in which he pleaded with and cajoled and insulted them trying to get them to recognize that the "debate" in which they supposedly engaged on the show was actually nothing more than political theater. There was no clear demarcation of issues, no respect for differing opinions, only the divisive demonization of the other side in an all out race to see who could win by humiliation. And that process doesn't help diversity, it doesn't foster or recognize or even acknowledge it - it kills it in the name of deciding who is right...or at least who is loudest.

It took a comedian from an overtly fake news program, to do what the failed institution of media has not, and give voice to what many of us are feeling. At a time in which we need to hear the words "we" and "us", all we get is "they" and "them". And at a time when the back and forth of what passes for politics these days leaves us nothing but dizzy and the open attacks on people's patriotism come quick and often, we need some sense of unity, particularly as we grow in diversity and feel people's often visceral reaction to that same diversity.

The text that you have heard today is part of Jesus' long closing prayer, which replaces the Last Supper in John's version of Jesus' last day. Jesus prays first for his return to glory (vs. 1-5), then for his disciples (vs. 6-19). This text from vs. 20-26 contain a third focus of Jesus' prayer: those who will come to faith in future generations. The prayer is itself a poem in three stanzas, with a gradual shift in focus from God to world. When Jesus begins praying he is speaking to God directly and intimately, and by the end of the prayer he is speaking not only to God but to his disciples and future generations of believers. There is a bit of a nod from John here. John intends the prayer to be read by this next generation of believers, John is writing this (in most opinions) perhaps more than 70 years after Jesus' death and resurrection and the audience and atmosphere are very different. But you can almost hear John whispering over your shoulder,

“See that? He’s talking about you!” In other words, *I’m* in this prayer. *You’re* in this prayer. *We* are all in this prayer.

This passage is all about pronouns - "That they may be one as we are one, with me in them and you in me" - it sounds like lyrics from the White Album...I halfway expect the next sentence to be "I am the walrus...koo koo ka choo." Jesus is using these pronouns to make links between all of the beings involved...himself, the Divine, and the disciples. He makes a link between all three and calls them one - a trinity of relationship...and a statement of unity.

But Jesus also prays that the church to come - the community of believers taught by the coming generations of disciples - that this "church" may be one. It might easily be argued that Jesus would be quite disappointed with this desire were he to see the state of Christianity today. But I think we might say that because of the vast diversity of expression in the Christian faith. So I might argue that the diversity wouldn't bother him, it's our lack of love and acceptance that would bother him. See, I don't think that he was talking about uniformity, just unity. And yes, there is a difference...a rather profound one that needs to be re-emphasized in a world immersed in a holy diversity - the way that God created us. But for many diversity does not evoke a sense of holiness, it generates concern and fear.

Jon Stewart was right when he made his accusations and is still right, in my opinion. Not much has changed since that diatribe; the race is still going full speed. In fact, the political discourse in our country seems only to reflect our general lack of basic tolerance, much less the compassion or respect that is demanded of us as people of faith in a supposedly "Christian Nation". We are not Christians who are known by our love, but Christians who are known by our anger and rage. And this may largely be because Christian churches have become clubs we join to support our lifestyles, not communities we enter in order to scrutinize and then amend our lifestyles. So we look for church to help build "I" and not to help turn us towards the "we". And this means that Christianity becomes a lot more about what God can do for us rather than what we might do for God. Note that the song we sing to close each worship service does not say “what does the LORD *request* of you”, but gives us *requirements* - justice, kindness and humility.

I'm not really talking about our politically dualistic system. This is far beyond a “left vs. right” issue anymore and if you want to see the effect that this kind of polarization is having, take a look at people under 30. The bad news is that they are leaving the church in droves, but the good news is that they are doing so for the right reasons. The church has done more to perpetuate this divisive mindset than any other agency. Lured by political and economic power, too many leaders in the church have stood by while Jesus gets used to justify everything from war to capitalism, both of which were deliberately absent from the early church experience as far as we can tell. I think that this younger crowd can do the basic math - they read the Bible, absorb the words of Jesus and then look to a church that seems to have either ignored or effectively neutered Jesus' teachings. And, lest you think that I am pointing the finger one direction, this is true for the so-called progressive church as well as the so-called conservative church. Our conservative brothers and sisters may hide behind legalism and dogma, true, but we do not have any better

hold on a sense of community - we're just as self-righteous, it just doesn't feel that way because we happen to agree with our opinions. Again - its justice, kindness and humility...nothing about being right. And the under 30s? No longer satisfied by the moral bankruptcy on either side, the under 30 crowd (and a few stragglers too) are leaving both sides and looking for a third way.

That "third way" is really a return to ancient ways. At one point in the church's history, the need for renewal was so high that many people took to extreme monasticism. We now call these people the "Desert Fathers and Mothers" and they lived very ascetic lives in caves in the deserts of 4th century Egypt, Palestine, Persia and Arabia. There they lived in isolation, but always came together for communion, for shared time and for prayer. It was a strange sort of community.

One such practitioner undertook a seventy-week fast, eating only once a week to become more receptive to God. When he was skin and bones, he asked God to reveal the meaning of a particular passage to him. No reply. Finally, the frustrated monk decided to go ask one of his brothers what the passage meant. The minute he walked out of his cave, an angel of God appeared to him and said, "Your seventy-week fast did not bring you closer to God, but now that you have humbled yourself enough to seek out your brother, God has sent me to reveal the meaning of this passage."

It wasn't dedication or his superhuman ability to discipline himself that gave this monk insight. It was the embrace of his fellow human beings with humility. It was, really, an appreciation of diversity. "Maybe", the monk thought, "My brother knows the answer, even though I do not." This is what opening ourselves up to one another can bring, particularly when we do it with the humility of no agenda.

If you have ever spent a Saturday serving at 363 or making mobile meals food or delivering those meals or working on a house with Rebuilding Together or tutoring kids then you might be aware of the fact that even on your "day off", sometimes working harder than you do during the week, you arrive home tired but oddly refreshed with your heart filled and often something new revealed. Service, humble service like this, can be just as mush for you as it is for anyone else. It is a way to be in community, to witness and celebrate diversity and to be closer to God.

This is why this is not only a great suggestion, but is crucial to our faith. Christianity and Judaism - cousins of faith - both *command* this from their adherents. According to Jonathon Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain, "the Hebrew Bible in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself', but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to 'love the stranger'". That stranger of whom the Bible speaks is diversity. It is difference, variety, unlikeness. That is how God would have us grow and walk in our knowledge of each other - and therefore God.

Jesus prays for hospitality here in this passage - he prays for us to be hospitable to one another at the deepest level possible, by recognizing ourselves and him in one another. In Greek the word for hospitality is *philoxenia* or "love of stranger". Unfortunately we see much more of another hybrid of that word - *xenophobia*. Diversity doesn't seem to be something to embrace, but

something to resist, or worse yet, to destroy. Jonathon Swift once said, "We have just enough religion to make us hate one another, but not enough to make us love one another." In this third way, it is religion that people are seeking. But not the shallow, legalistic thing that passes for religion today...not the dogma-driven country club that preaches morality from isolation. This religion is a practice that calls us more deeply into ourselves and gives us the moral imagination to walk a mile in our brother or sister's shoes. This religion, through seeking justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God, embraces God's rich diversity and allows us to see the face of God in other people because we first see the faces they already have. Encountering another human being with humility and love may be the closest to God we ever get.

That can start right here. Look around you. It might be easy to think that Mayflower is a monolithic place - that we are all the same. But we are young and old from a wealth of religious backgrounds - Catholic, mainline, fundamentalist, evangelical, atheist...we are gay, lesbian, straight, transgendered, bisexual, questioning...every kind of educational level from preschool to ridiculously over-educated, in recovery, off the wagon, broken, somewhat whole, devastated and joyous, artist and engineer, musician and teacher, lawyer and counselor...heck, even the occasional Republican. The truth is that we are far more diverse than is immediately obvious, but I would never characterize us as the face of the future church. We are, as all churches are, a reflection of the aberrations and illusions of the culture in which we live. We reflect where we are. But hopefully what draws us together is not our similarities or our differences, it is our intention to live out the life-affirming love of God as best we can, where we are with what we have. What draws us together is an embrace of our diversity, not a retreat from it.

This is why I am happy to serve a congregation in the UCC. This is a denomination built on the very notion of unity through diversity and the messy process of living the Gospel through a thousand different lenses. The UCC is in a permanent state of becoming. It is designed for us to continue to re-define and never be satisfied with what or where we are, because this is what a life of faith is. We're never certain, never solidified, but always reaching and living in hope. And that is both a humble and a humbling process.

Yesterday we held what is called an ecclesiastical council at our Association meeting. The Oklahoma Association exists to unify our local churches in Oklahoma and also to do some practical things like recommend people for ordination. And yesterday we made history. In a unanimous vote, we recommended Ben Fields, the first transgendered man for ordination in our Association - and quite possibly the first in the state of Oklahoma. It came as a nice balance to the steady flow of legislation coming out of this session at the Capitol.

But beyond what this says politically and ecclesiologically, it expresses a unity that is refreshing. I'm quite certain that not everyone in that room would make a blanket approval of LGBT issues, but I am also equally convinced that Ben's faith story, his eloquence and heartfelt witness and his clear calling convinced them that testimonies are better than tests, and that love is stronger than any rules or regulations or pre-conceived ideas. The Holy Spirit was alive in that room

yesterday, working on each of us to expand our hearts and to reflect on where God is and how God is working.

What if we allowed that Spirit out of that room and into the world? What if we were to search intently, on every first encounter, for the presence of God in each and every person we met? What if we erred on the side of generosity or gave people the benefit of the doubt that they were doing the best they could where they were with what they have? What if we remembered our lessons from history...what kind of evil comes from the demonization of others and what sin breaks free from the process of "otherization" that we seem to so easily engage in today. What this text reminds us today is that in the pronoun vocabulary of Christian life, we should have I, You and We...but we must set aside They or Them...only that way can we be "one".

How do we ever know that we are one? Well,, I think that Ben said it best in his theological papers and his presentation before us yesterday. In his time as a chaplain, the ministry to which he will be ordained, he learned what chaplains often know - that God is present in far more ways than we ever anticipate. He found a connection to people he never would have imagined having a connection to - people that by all rights a transgendered male chaplain with a decidedly liberal theology should have avoided like the plague. But in the suffering of the diagnosis, or the struggle of decision making, in loss and grief and pain...in the most broken of times, God was most present and you could most clearly see God on the faces of other human beings.

Jesus prays that we would be known by our love...that the love with which God loved Jesus would also be in us so that Jesus might be in us...that same spark of divinity that was present in Jesus is also in each of us. What kind of world could we have if that was the place we started from with every encounter? What if we *began* with that unity? And what if our mark for unity was not a test but a testimony? What if with every fill-up, every dentist trip, every school drop-off, every meeting, every food order, every cup of coffee, four-way intersection, public lecture, court date, seminar, therapy session, workout, family dinner or encounter with a stranger we began with the acknowledgement of our common humanity and the presence of the divine in each of us? What if instead of asking "What's *that* guy's problem?", we asked "What *is* that guy's problem?" What if we thought, prayed and even legislated that way? Yes, there would still be failures and consequences, there would still be pain and suffering, there would still be people missing the mark with every passing minute...but don't you think that the conversation would be different? Don't you think that even as we know that what Jesus prays is true - that the world does not know God - that the most sure way to make God known is by reflecting God...by being love...even in our broken and flawed ways?

You might be in a great place to ask the questions. You might be in the messy and often frustrating denomination that is trying to wrestle with this faithful walk. You might be in the right place to seek faith without firmness, truth without dogma and glory without the artificial glow. You are in the right place to know that if we look *to* one another instead of *against* one another we might be surprised at what we see...we might be surprised to find God looking back at us. I in you and you in me and him in us...and all of us one.

AMEN



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