

“Unity in Diversity” – June 9, 2019 – Pentecost Sunday

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Several weeks ago, there was a human-interest story that I read on the internet. At a diner in Alabama, three young black men were sitting together, waiting for their meal, and they noticed an elderly white woman dining alone. One of the men, Jamario Howard, felt compassion for the woman and went over to her and asked if he could sit with her. When she said yes, they started talking together, and the woman told Jamario that the next day would have been her 60th wedding anniversary. He invited her to come and eat with him and his friends, and she readily agreed. The three young men welcomed the widow to their table, and they enjoyed a delightful meal together. Someone took their photograph, and Jamario uploaded it to his Facebook page, and his post went viral. Reflecting on the unusual event, Jamario remarked “The point in this is always be nice and kind to people. You never know what they are going through...Everyone has a story, so do not judge.”

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/three-young-men-invite-elderly-widow-to-sit-with-them-after-seeing-her-dining-alone-2019-04-24/>

Another story, published a few days ago, tells of a unique friendship that developed on the campus of the University of Texas Austin. A 67-year-old man named David came to the campus daily to panhandle. He cheerfully greets every student who walks by him. Most simply keep walking. But one student named Ryan, stopped for a conversation with David. He learned that David had been a student at the school in the early 70’s – a studio art major – but a devastating accident changed his life dramatically. Substance abuse and mental health issues kept David from ever finishing his degree. The junior student Ryan took the time to get to know David and learn his story. Ryan wrote about their friendship on his blog. The story got out, and David was invited to come back to the university as a student to finish his degree, and an alumnus offered to pay his tuition. Ryan spoke of their unique friendship, noting that “you can’t judge a book by its cover.” <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/university-of-texas-student-helps-panhandler-david-carter-go-back-to-college-after-he-dropped-out-2019-06-05/?intcid=CNI-00-10aaa3a>

So, what do these two stories have to do with Pentecost? In each we see how looking past differences among people can yield surprising results. Humans have a natural tendency to create groups of similarity. We find comfort and security in those environs. Being with other people who are like we are is safe. We understand each other because we share a commonality. Life in unity is predictable, and any threats we perceive that might disrupt that predictability are seen in a negative light. Status quo is good, diversity is bad. When all these little groups unified around their own histories, beliefs, values, and expectations bump into other groups, conflict can arise.

The story from the Book of Genesis gives us a prehistory view of the human race. In this story, the human beings were unified. They were nomads, moving together, working together, and speaking the same language. They found safety and security with one another. They were comfortable. But they grew afraid. In their comfort they began to wonder about the what ifs in life. What if we were to get scattered? What if things began to change? What if someone decides to leave the group and go elsewhere? They wanted things to stay as they were. They didn't want anyone or anything to mess up their routine. They enjoyed their existence, and so they decided to make a name for themselves. They wanted to be known as unified group.

Using their skills, they decided to make bricks, from the dust of the earth from which they had come. They used these bricks to form a community. No longer wandering nomads, they wanted to settle in one place and be known. To have a name. They began to build a city, including a magnificent tower that would reach high into the heavens. A city would be a tangible sign of their unity. But it was also a response to their fear of being scattered, of being separated from the larger group.

God took notice of their work. And God saw that they were building not out of industry, but out of fear. They were afraid of change, and they wanted to strengthen their sense of togetherness to avoid any possibility of change. Fear of unknown kept them together. Of course, life without any changes will grow stagnant. If life is simply a series of repeatable routines, with no adventure, no creativity, no industry, is that really life? Can there be growth?

The story tells us that God decided to stir the pot. God scattered the people and introduced new languages. God gave the people the opportunity for growth and maturation. In that event, diversity was born. God created diversity, you can see that simply by looking at the Creation, and I think it's safe to say that God saw that diversity was good.

That's not to say that unity is bad. It's not. But when unity divides us from one another, as in our unified group is better than your unified group, or when unity divides us from God, as in we don't need you God, because we have each other, then it is bad.

And so of course we have seen the problems of exclusionary unity throughout history. When one group oppresses another group or enacts violence against another. It's a problem that seems to be a natural part of our humanity that we have to learn to overcome. Occasionally we see great examples of unity or solidarity. Generally those come as a response to some unforeseen tragedy. Some horrible disaster occurs or other dreadful event, and people seem

to want to rally together in response. We have seen it this spring, in the communities in the Midwest who have been hit with horrible flooding and others who have experienced devastating tornadoes. When bad things occur, people seem to have a natural tendency to put aside differences in order to work together.

So, we naturally want to live in our homogeneous little groups and not let anyone else in, and we naturally want to put aside our differences to help one another in times of crisis. But, once the crisis is over, we go back into the safety of our little unified group.

And then there's Pentecost. The Holy Spirit comes rushing in like a great wind into the room where the disciples were gathered after the Ascension of Jesus. The Spirit rests upon each person, like a tongue of flame – claiming them, empowering them. The disciples rush outside, speaking the gospel in different languages, illustrating and emphasizing that the gospel of Jesus Christ reaches out to all humanity, covering the diversity – none are to be excluded. And the church of Jesus Christ is born.

The Holy Spirit offers this amazing gift of unity within diversity. Through the Holy Spirit, the diverse members of Christ's body, the church, are unified. The Holy Spirit tramples down the barriers that divide us and uplifts our uniqueness and our diversity. The Holy Spirit helps us to transcend our natural tendency to use our unity as a means of discrimination toward other individuals and groups.

God's Spirit also empowers our natural tendency to want to help people despite our differences, not only in times of trouble, but in all occasions. Following any type of tragedy, people are able to set aside differences for a while. We jump into the fray, side by side, digging out debris, setting up shelters, sending money and food, and waving our flags of unity. But when the dust clears, we go back to the same old hatreds and prejudices.

The miracle of Pentecost is unity within diversity. And Pentecost can happen at any time. We all are struggling to make sense of the world. There are many unknowns and questions for which we have no answers. In our fear, like our friends in Babel so long ago, desiring to make a name for themselves in building a town and a tower, we stay safe and comfortable in what is trusted and known. The thought of becoming scattered is frightening, because we don't know where we might end up. We want to stay with us, our group. We don't want to interact with them, the other. May God open our eyes and our hearts to discover that despite our differences, that in the end, we all are longing for the same things. We really aren't all that different after all.