

June 23, 2019  
Rev. Jane Florence  
“Sacred Unity”  
Ephesians 2: 14-22



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*For Christ is our peace; Christ has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. Christ has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so he that might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.*

I was coming out of the grocery store on Wednesday the same time as another man was leaving the store. He greeted someone he knew who was on the way into the store. In the brief passing, he responded to the other man’s “what’s up?” with, “I have got to go to a meeting at work today- about diversity training. I guess we gotta learn how to work with those.....”

I’ll let you complete that sentence with the string of sexist, racist, homophobic words you can imagine he said. He continued in front of me out of the store and to the parking lot where I saw him get in his car parked near mine. My eye was drawn to his rear bumper and the Christian symbol displayed there. One thought that I can share with you was my perplexity and sorrow that he had to go to an employment training to learn to be respectful of others- why had that message not been taught in his church?

Last week, I spoke about inclusiveness in terms of other faith traditions - dipping our toes in other rivers of spiritual wisdom - as our Jewish teachings borrowed from cultures and religions around them. Today, we address inclusiveness in another perspective as we seek to create community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to: conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, believers and agnostics, women and men, sexual orientations and gender identities, all classes, races and abilities.

Some hear the list and say, of course, all should be included in our church community. Some hear the list and agree on some, but disagree on others. The Global United Methodist church is not United in understanding diversity and inclusion. We are not alone in that struggle. The early flowers of Jesus were trying to figure out just who should be included and who should not also. That’s actually a common, if not the most common theme of the early church writings - trying to figure out who can be in the church communities.

The letter begins with praise for Christ in God’s love. Then the author’s prayer moves from thanksgiving to petition. Praying “ that the God may give you the Spirit of wisdom so that you will come to know God better, .. I pray also for the eyes of your heart to be enlightened” to this gift of God’s love. The author reminds the Ephesians that at one time we were all out of alignment with God, but God has now made us alive with Christ. Then he reminds them how in the past, there was division. Gentiles, uncircumcised, non-Israelites - were separated from the citizens of Israel. Jews did not

go around trying to proselytize other people. Either you were born that way - or you weren't. But Paul writes in his letter, "Christ has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

This claim was not some theoretical rhetoric or naive utopia imagining. It was fact. Those who traveled with Jesus saw him break down dividing walls - between women and men, between Jews and Samaritans, between rich and poor, between able-bodied and blind, lame and diseased persons. Jesus broke down the walls dividing Jews from Roman soldiers, walls between the oppressed and their oppressors. The gospel writings of Jesus are clear in that message, Jesus excluded no one. Jesus broke laws that excluded. Jesus defied the authorities to include all. This letter tells the communities of Jesus followers- the walls have come down. Oh, how we wish.

Maybe we aren't arguing over being circumcised or uncircumcised as in the text, but the result is the same: divisiveness remains - 2,000 years later- the community of Jesus followers defies Jesus instructions to bring down the walls of division.

Gay rights has been and still is a hot topic for some- particularly in the church. Our own UMC global church has done great harm to our LGBTQ brothers and sisters with their discriminatory language and rules. As true as the conflict is, we know that most every congregation has had LGBTQ persons attending their congregations on regular basis throughout the centuries. Mostly by staying quiet to do so. Which means forfeiting having a chance to truly be known in the fullness of their sacred being, in order that those who love a particular way may simply blend in and be left alone. Alone is where it leaves our LGBTQ siblings when we force silence upon their love, their spouse and their children.

Rainbow walls are not the only ones still erected in America's churches. According to several national studies race, ethnic persuasion, class and age still divide our churches into exclusive groups in a very practical sense as well. We don't fight so publicly against racial diversity as we do against gender identities. We don't make extra rules that ban or exclude people based on anything but gender roles and loves, yet churches remain mostly homogenous.

Someone in church will say, Why let 'those people' in? Whomever 'those' people are in their list with criteria of who they love, or the color of their skin, or the nation of origin, or their money in the bank, or their street address, or their religious beliefs. Why let 'those people' in? Because, People are people. They are we, We are they. "Christ has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us."

I share with you some words from **Archbishop Desmond Tutu** - "Africans have a thing called ubuntu. It is about the essence of being human, it is part of the gift that Africa will give the world. It embraces hospitality, caring about others, being willing to go the extra mile for the sake of another. We believe that a person is a person through other persons, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. Therefore you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in community, in belonging."<sup>1</sup>

We need to learn ubuntu; some need reminded of ubuntu. I am because you are.

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*.

At the Festival of Peace, in Florianopolis, South Brazil, the journalist and philosopher Lia Diskin related a beautiful and touching story of a tribe in Africa she called Ubuntu. She explained how an anthropologist had been studying the habits and customs of this tribe, and when he finished his work, had to wait for transportation that would take him to the airport to return home. He'd always been surrounded by the children of the tribe, so to help pass the time before he left, he proposed a game for the children to play. He'd bought lots of candy and sweets in the city, so he put everything in a basket with a beautiful ribbon attached. He placed it under a solitary tree, and then he called the kids together. He drew a line on the ground and explained that they should wait behind the line for his signal. And that when he said "Go!" they should rush over to the basket, and the first to arrive there would win all the candies. When he said "Go!" the children grasp each other's hands and ran off towards the tree as a group. Once there, they simply shared the candy with each other and happily ate it. The anthropologist was very surprised. He asked them why they had all gone together, especially if the first one to arrive at the tree could have won everything in the basket – all the sweets. A young girl simply replied: "How can one of us be happy if all the others are sad?" <sup>2</sup>

We are all made in the image of God. We all carry a spark of the Divine within. As all of our sparks come together, we can glimpse the Divine in greater magnitude. If parts of the image are not gathered together, parts of the Divine remain unseen to us. Let us Seek to create a community that is inclusive of ALL people, Let us create real and honest relationships to see the Divine more fully in all. Let us pray that the God of us All may give us the Spirit of wisdom so that we will come to know God better, ..so the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened" to this gift of God's love found in all.

"How can one of us be happy if all the others are sad?"

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.jackyyenga.com/the-spirit-of-ubuntu/>