

Unity and Diversity in Christ

Acts 18:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

April 24, 2016

In 1968, Martin Luther King lamented that 11 am was the most segregated hour in the nation. In her book, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that keep us Apart*, Christena Cleveland reiterates this lament as she explores the ways in which our churches are still divided, not just racially, but ethnically, culturally and theologically as well. Cleveland is a social psychologist and researcher who works with pastors and organizational leaders on issues of multiculturalism and how to build unity. She explores research that shows that while America is becoming more diverse, churches are increasingly becoming more ethnically, culturally and theologically homogenous. (p. 28)

We are attracted to people who look and think like us; we perceive them as familiar and safe. "Research on [what attracts us to each other] suggests that familiarity is *the* most powerful predictor of friendship. The more we interact with a person, the more familiar we become with them. The more familiar we become with them, the more we like them." (p. 28) Familiar people become our friends; they "get" us and our humour and values and beliefs.

Cleveland says: "Here is the conundrum for the church: If people who *seem* familiar are perceived as more likeable and people who are completely unfamiliar are perceived as less likable, we're going to naturally befriend the people who *seem* familiar. And the people who *seem* familiar are the ones that we see around us" all the time because they are the ones we live with and go to school and church with. It's a vicious circle that means we live and study and worship with people who are pretty much just like us, which leads us to be attracted to the same people because they are familiar to us, which means we become blind to those who are different from us. (p. 29) I'm not sure that Jesus, in the great commission in Matthew, meant for us to make disciples of all nations so that we could all stay in our ethnic and theological groups.

It's no wonder then, that we have a hard time reaching beyond the familiar. We form strong bonds with those with whom we share experiences and keep those with whom we don't share experiences at a distance. We become so good at this that we even create divisions *within* divisions. (p. 31) We see this with the many

different denominations of Christianity there are. And we need only look at the larger category of Mennonite, to see how it is divided—Old Order Mennonite, Conservative Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, MC USA, MC Canada—and now within MC USA, the ways in which we are dividing due to very specific experiences and differences. We have formed, and continue to form, strong bonds with people who think like us and share our attitudes and beliefs and as a result, we become less tolerant of those who are not like us. And we become more insistent that to be part of “us”, one needs to hold these same shared values and beliefs.

Shared experience is a powerful unifier. Just think of any group experience you have had, and how that served to create a bond with those with whom you shared that experience. Consider, for example, how connected we feel with other youth and sponsors we went to convention with, whether it was just last summer, or 20 years ago. We shared humorous and serious moments with a particular group of people. There are inside jokes that develop, and someone only has to use a word or phrase for the whole group to burst into laughter. Shared experience continues to bind us together and helps us to feel close to one another. It continues to nurture our sense of connection with others and unifies us as a group.

But in the same way that shared experience brings us together, it can also divide. Consider new members who join the group who didn't share that particular moment with the rest of the group. The inside joke then becomes a point of exclusion resulting in insiders and outsiders—if you don't get the joke, you're not one of us. I suspect we've all had those moments where we have felt on the outside of a shared experience.

Or maybe it's not a shared joke or experience, but a shared conviction about what the proper belief or practice is for this congregation, or this conference, or this denomination. When people unite around a shared conviction, while the group feels a strong sense of unity and connection, there is a bigger divide with those who don't share that conviction; distance is created and reinforced. Our natural human tendency is to create categories; to know which group we belong to and which group is different. We naturally distinguish *us* from *them*. And research shows that “the mere existence of divisions triggers hostility between groups.” (p.33) Since most of us gravitate toward congregations of people who are like us, we aren't aware of the dark side of division. In fact, as long as it's not motivated

by explicit prejudice, we see homogenous congregations as just fine. It fits in with our consumer culture, where we “shop” for a church that meets our needs. But our needs are generally best served, and we feel most comfortable with, people who are like us.

However, when we form homogenous groups, the unintended bi-product is prejudice. “Prejudice tends to result in division between groups and division between groups tends to result in prejudice. What begins as seemingly harmless homogeneity often snowballs into distrust, inaccurate perceptions of other groups, prejudice and hostility.” (p.33) Research also shows that we tend to treat group members really well and non-members not so well. We may think this doesn’t apply to the church, but in fact, we are fairly good at treating those who believe what we believe well, and those that we perceive as violating one of our core values, we don’t treat well. And Cleveland even says that “being reminded of our Christian identity and values, rather than causing us to love all others more, leads people to love their fellow group members [better], but hate those who do not share their core values, attitudes and experiences.” (p. 34)

The church today is facing some serious challenges. We can be somewhat reassured when we read 1 Corinthians. The church in Corinth was also facing challenges. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians addresses several conflicts the church was facing. Paul has his customary greeting and thanksgiving at the beginning, then he launches right into these verses that call on the Corinthians to be united in the same mind and purpose.

Corinth was a major city in Greece. It was located on a narrow piece of land between 2 port cities, and was a crossroad for trade and commerce. The people of Corinth had a reputation for being unruly, hard-drinking and sexually promiscuous. The people who belonged to the church in Corinth had a powerful encounter with Paul and the gospel of Jesus Christ, but conversion doesn’t happen overnight. It is a slow process of figuring out what it means to leave behind the old life, and live into the new life. It is likely that most of them converted from paganism, and leaving behind the influences of their previous life was proving a challenge. (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, p. 2064)

This letter is clearly written to the church in Corinth. It is not addressed to individuals, but to the whole community. Paul is addressing the conflicts that are

present in this community; conflicts about sexual morality, in chapter 5; eating meat sacrificed to idols in chapter 8; disagreement about eating practices at the Lord's Supper, in chapter 11; spiritual gifts, in chapters 12-14; and the interpretation of the resurrection of the dead, in chapter 15; in addition to the conflict in our passage about people arguing about which leader or preacher they liked best.

It would appear that among the Corinthians, spirituality and how to live as a Christian were seen as a personal and individual matter. Rather than seeing themselves as part of one community, they were dividing up into groups, according to which leader they liked best—Paul, the founder of the church, or Apollos, the awesome preacher, or Cephas (Peter), the apostle who knew Jesus personally. Some said they belonged to Christ, but in this context, it was likely a more generic “Well, I’m Christian”, or maybe “I’m spiritual but not religious”, rather than a following after Christ, who gives them their identity. Rather than being concerned about a unified communal witness, they divided themselves up according to which leader they liked best. They were looking to particular leaders for their identity, rather than looking to Christ as the one who could give them a unified identity.

Paul re-defines spirituality and the Christian life as a communal endeavor. He confronts their division by asking if Christ has been divided. He names their choosing of favourites by reminding them in whose name they were baptized. The best witness to the Christian life is not the worthiness of individuals, or the identity of their leaders, but how the community as a whole reflects the transforming power of Christ.

For that is what Christ does to a group of people—transforms them from a motley group of individuals into a community where previous relationships are redefined and re-made. The household of God is not based on categories of race, class, gender or culture, but on Christ and what Christ did in his life and ministry—relating across class, gender, nationality, profession; eating with tax collectors and sinners; engaging with foreign women at public wells in the heat of the day; touching and healing those considered unclean and outcast. Christ modelled for us what it means to relate regardless of where the other comes from or what they believe or what they do. In Christ, all people are gathered together. In 1

Corinthians, Paul makes this point—that it is the unified church that is the best witness to Christ and what God is doing through Christ.

Paul refers to both the crucifixion and baptism as the means of this unity. Both crucifixion and baptism re-define us and give us a new identity. In crucifixion, Christ re-defined the powers of life and death, taking what was appalling and horrific in his culture, and using it to bring peace and reconciliation. Crucifixion is re-defined through the resurrection, and because of that, our identity is found in the ways of Christ which defy the powers of death and participate in those things which bring life and wholeness to all. In baptism, as we go under the water, the old person and way of life fall away—we die to the old self; when we are raised up from the water, we rise to new life—we are made new. It is following after Christ by giving ourselves over to the powers of death, and rising to the powers of life and wholeness. Of course, those of us who are baptized know that this isn't a one-time occurrence. We are continually dying to our old self and rising to our new self; we are continually being made new. Our baptism serves as a touchstone, a reminder of who we are becoming in Christ. It gives us our identity as Christ followers.

Paul also uses the image of the physical body, later in this letter, to illustrate how the body of Christ is to function. Just as each part of the physical body is dependent on other parts of the body for some of its functioning, so too, the body of Christ needs the other members for its functioning. It is the uniqueness, the diversity, of each body part that helps the physical body to function to its maximum capacity; it is the same with the body of Christ—the more diverse it is, the better it will function, the more it will live into its full capacity.

A diverse group is a healthy group. Cleveland points out that diverse groups are more creative and effective than groups made up of people who all think the same. (p. 39) This makes sense. When a group is confronted with a problem, if everyone has a similar background and similar point of view, it will be pretty hard for them to think and dream beyond what they collectively know. But if there is a group of people who all represent different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, each person contributes from their point of view and because they are all different, their pool of knowledge is broader, giving them more resources to address the problem. We learn from each other, and the best learning environment is the one where there is new information coming to the table

regularly. New information generally only comes when there are new perspectives and new voices.

The household of God is the healthiest when it is diverse. A healthy body does not consist of only eyes or ears or mouths or hands. A healthy body has many parts, and each part is needed for the functioning of the body. The body grows in health and vitality as each unique member contributes what they can, and is valued for who they are. It is in the presence of those who are different from us that we face our own biases and prejudices. It is as we rub up against those who are different from us, that we can then let go of any preconceived ideas about the other.

The challenge and invitation for us as a community, as the united body of Christ, is to embrace the diversity that exists among us. Rather than fear conversations or experiences that we think will highlight the differences among us, we are being invited to lean into them, to explore with curiosity, and inquire of another in order to understand more fully; and in the presence of Christ, to notice how each person makes our community richer because of what they bring. The body of Christ is more complete in diversity and more fully witnesses to Christ as each member is valued for what they bring and for how Christ is revealed in them.

This is not an easy path to follow. It is tricky to figure out how to be “in agreement” and “united in the same mind and same purpose” and to know what that means and looks like. And yet, Paul gives us a clue: if we find our identity in Christ, through his crucifixion and our baptism in Christ’s name, that common identity can keep us focused on something greater than ourselves. A few weeks ago, Ben pointed to the power of the name of Jesus Christ to heal and save, and in this letter, Paul points to the same thing: it is the name of Jesus Christ that unites us; that helps us to live in agreement and to be united with one mind and purpose. Paul knows that it is only the name of Jesus Christ which can bring such unity. It is the name of Jesus, not any human name, person or endeavor that makes us one. We are divided when our own names, or convictions, or beliefs are given priority over the name of Jesus. We are made one when we focus on the name of Jesus Christ, and allow his name to give us our identity and purpose.

May it be so.