

Sermon for the 4th Sunday After Pentecost 2010

The categories that divide us today may be different than in Paul's day as he describes in the third chapter of Galatians, but divisions persist in congregations and in the broader church – divisions that run along lines of ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, ideology, political affiliation, and any number of other factors.

Paul reminds us that whatever human categories may describe us, they do not define us, "for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." All human categories are subordinate and ultimately irrelevant to our primary identity as members of the body of Christ. I would like to share three perspectives that relate to this passage this morning.

YOU MAY find it strange that I... do not believe in interracial marriage. I do not believe in interracial dating or even in having friends of other races. I do not espouse trying to understand racial differences or promoting awareness of other races. I can say all of this unabashedly because I do not believe in race!

These words by an African American, Rodney S. Sadler, Jr. from an article in Christian Century sound shocking but you may begin to agree when you consider that as Sadler says “*race is a relatively recent construction conveniently created at precisely the moment when nations from the European continent were setting out to colonize the world. The construction is a precursor to an economic policy, not a result of scientific study. It came from the desire of some people to legitimate the taking of land from others. Because of perceived "racial" differences, people could be set on a hierarchical ladder of superior and inferior types; those declared "superior" then had an "obligation" to tend to the interests (natural resources and labor) of the "inferiors." Even the most innocuous use of the concept perpetuates the notion that perceived differences in appearance relate to actual differences in intellect, criminality potential and sexuality. Hence, to suggest that the theory of race is legitimate is a racist proposition, one that leads many to conclude that perceived differences in appearance are consequential for human valuation.*”

Pamela Eisenbaum, a Jewish scholar of Christian Origins, writes extensively about Paul. She makes the important point that Jew and Gentile coming together in harmony while remaining

distinct is the goal of Paul's mission. *“Paul's vision encompasses Jew and Gentile because, as a monotheist, Paul understands all peoples as part of God's creation. If Gentiles become circumcised and thus become like Jews, that implies that God's sovereignty does not extend to other peoples, which would be a theological contradiction for Paul. Eisenbaum says that Paul did not mean “to articulate the destruction of human categories of existence so that people might share the same human essence. Rather, he articulated the construction of new human social relations based on the model of family. Gal. 3:28 encapsulates the message that people who are different can, if they so choose, come to understand themselves as meaningfully related to each other, committed to their well being, and part of a shared world.”*

Finally the Dean of Southwark, one of London's great cathedrals, invited our Presiding Bishop to preach last Sunday following her visit to Scotland and her address to the Synod of the Episcopal Church of Scotland. Significantly, Southwark stands at the oldest crossing point of the tidal Thames at what was the only entrance to the City of London across the river for many centuries. It is not only a place of worship but also of hospitality to every kind of person: princes and paupers, prelates and prostitutes, poets, playwrights, prisoners and patients have all found refuge here. I offer just a portion of Dean Colin Slee's sermon:

It seems to me that love must, by its essential nature, be always unconditional. We welcome Katharine Jefferts Schori to this pulpit because we love our sisters and brothers in the Episcopal Church of the United States; not because she is female, or a woman bishop ahead of us, or has permitted a practicing lesbian to become a bishop (As it happens she couldn't have stopped it after all the legal and proper canonical electoral processes resulted in the election and nomination), we welcome her because she is our sister in Christ.

It may be that some Anglicans will decide to walk a separate path. I believe the Chapter and congregation of this church will walk the same path as the Episcopal Church of America, the links are deep in our history, especially here. Their actions in recent months have been entirely in accord with the Anglican ways of generosity and breadth. They have tried to ensure everyone is recognized as a child of God. They have behaved entirely in accord with their canon laws and their freedom as an independent Province of the Church, not imposing or interfering with others with whom they disagree but proceeding steadily and openly themselves.

The lesson from St Mark's gospel was the end of a string of parables, but it ends with a great storm. You will understand if I say that caused me to smile.

Parables are deeply incarnational. They are about the revelation of the presence of God that we can discover and proclaim in the most ordinary experiences of life. This evening's passage contained short 'kingdom parables' about seed and growth, about minute beginnings and prodigious fruit. If the seed is never sown then we cannot discover the results. If Christ had not died there would have been no resurrection. If God had not let go there would have been no incarnation and salvation, no Jesus. If Jesus had not fallen asleep in the stern of the boat the disciples would not have discovered how frightened and alone they could feel without his presence – and these were largely fishermen.

It is my hope and prayer that Anglicans with different perspectives can continue to recognise their common inheritance in the faith even when they live many miles apart and conduct their churches in divergent ways; I also hope they read the scriptures intelligently. It is my hope that this is a way that love can continue such that its realization is in peace. It is our constant experience that God is discovered when we have the courage to let go, to give freedom to the smallest of things and allow God to work giving the growth, we know not how. AMEN

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