

Unity & Diversity

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Preaching on:

1 Corinthians 12:1–11

My topic this morning, on this Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend, is unity and diversity. Martin Luther King was one of our greatest Christian leaders and he was one of our greatest national leaders, and I'm trying to think about unity and diversity from his perspective, as if he were living through the events of these last few years with us. And as I begin this morning I find my mind drifting back to those words I learned as a schoolboy, the words I had to stand up and address to the flag with my hand on my heart every day at the start of class: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

And right there, in that single sentence, is an illustration of the problem we face today and have always faced as a nation. As a nation, we uplift unity. We are after all, the *United* States of America, *one* nation, under *one* God, indivisible. And yet, when have we ever truly been unified?

There have always been differences of opinion. There have always been political battles. There have always been class, and economic, and racial, and gendered divisions and inequalities in our national life. And when has there ever been liberty and justice for all?

As the prophet Isaiah said: after God had blessed the house of Israel with every blessing, God “expected justice, but saw bloodshed.” And there has always been violence in America. We’ve spilled blood over and over again—Native Americans, Black Americans, immigrants, women, organized labor, children, LGBTQ people. We spill blood out of greed, out of fear, out of hate, exploiting, subjugating, terrorizing. We spill blood trying to get rid of the people who we don’t think belong inside our unity, we spill blood trying to maintain control over people we don’t want to let out of our unity. There’s something about the United States that needs unity, but when have we ever been truly unified? Liberty and justice have always been valued in America, diversity has always been a part of America, but when has there ever been liberty and justice *for all*?

Now, as Christians and Americans, I think many of you who are listening to me right now, sense that we have some responsibility for unity, and some responsibility to diversity, and to liberty and justice for all. But, if you’re anything like me, a lot of the time you probably don’t know what to do about it. Can there be unity at a time like this? Is it even advisable? There are a lot of toxic and dangerous people out there! How can we allow ourselves to get on the same page with people who seem to have devoted themselves to disinformation, hatred, and anger? How do you work with that, while staying true to your ideals? How can you be unified with people who are working to undermine the very democracy that we’re supposed to be unified in?

And yet in a previous decade, a decade that resembled ours in many ways with its polarization, hatred, violence, and systemic disenfranchisement, Martin Luther King, Jr. chose a message of unity. He chose a message of unity to build a diverse movement to drive Jim Crow out of the South, to gain the right to vote for Black Americans, and to end the dehumanizing, violent lie of separate but equal. King never preached a message of us versus them. Instead, he preached the American dream: He preached the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution and liberty and justice for all. He almost never backed down from a fight but engaged his detractors and his enemies with love, with compassion, and with an unfailing belief that a nation that had never been just or free for his people could come together and do better.

Where did that unfailing belief come from? Where did that hope come from? Well, if we go back even further in history, we come to our scripture reading for this morning, somewhere around the year 50. Paul is writing to the Corinthian church about spiritual gifts. And the second half of the reading more or less makes sense to us, but the opening here is a little confusing. “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord”

except by the Holy Spirit.”

It's a little hard to parse. But I think it would help to give a little context. Apparently, most of the Corinthian church was composed of folks who had converted from the Greek, Roman, or Egyptian religions (aka pagans). They had been worshipers of Jupiter, Aphrodite, Athena, Isis, Osiris, Bacchus. A little of this, a little of that, probably. And, of course, they all would have recognized that the Roman emperor was divine, and they probably would have worshiped him too here and there. The Roman Empire was barreling rapidly toward the jumping-the-shark phase of its decadent downfall, and in an attempt to unify its citizenry, the emperor was declared a god about a century before Paul was writing, and temples and images were erected to him throughout the empire.

Worshiping the emperor would eventually become a sort of loyalty test to the state—one which, of course, no Christian could ever pass. Because when Caesar became a god, the empire declared of him, “*Caesar kurios*,” Caesar is Lord. And not only could Christians not say that, they chose to differentiate themselves from the spiritual and political values of the Roman Empire by declaring, in a statement of faith equal parts spiritual and political, as Paul does in our reading, “*Jesus kurios*,” Jesus is Lord. And in time, Christians would be persecuted by the empire for that defiance and that declaration.

And 1,900 years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. also put his faith in and dedicated his life to not the power and the goodness of the empire, but to the power and goodness of God—God who, by creating all human beings in the image of God, made them all to be free and equal. King’s unfailing faith that a nation could come together in defiance of its true history to better live out its ideals was essentially a faith handed down to him from the earliest Christians who eked out a spiritual existence of hope and truth at the margins of an oppressive empire that was devouring the world and had declared itself God. The Civil Rights movement unified us not in a deified, idealized vision of US history, but in the promised vision of God’s future that will one day redeem all of history.

I’m thinking there’s a lesson here for us today. We don’t want to add to the polarization and hatred of our times. And we cannot compromise with conspiracy. We can’t give white nationalism a free pass. We can’t ignore the active and concentrated attack on the integrity of our election system, which is itself an attack on the very best of what America represents—an attack on truth, fairness, and unity. So, what can we do? Well, we’ve got to be clear about who we are. We can’t be so namby-pamby in the middle trying so hard to never offend anyone that we never say out loud what we actually believe and what we fundamentally refuse to believe. And standing on the rock of our faith, we’ve got to work with God and our neighbors for a better future. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Now, unity feels impossible. And it is. Perfect unity, as we’ve discussed, has never been a part of our history. But we’ve got to be clear about what’s fueling the disunity. The disunity that we’re

disintegrating into is being fueled by chaos, conspiracy theories, lies, political extremism, selfish opportunism, pessimism, and despair. Facing all that, we may feel like unity is impossible. But what we have to see is that the drain of disunity that we're circling is actively destructive. And so we have a choice: the sure path to destruction or the hard path to a better unity.

And what does a better unity look like? Is it a compromise with evil like we fear it might be? Or is it a unity, as Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us, that clings to the very best of our traditions, that not only upholds our greatest achievements but makes them available to more people more reliably, and that moves closer and closer to liberty and justice for all. It's a unity that is inclusive, not exclusive. It's a unity that is selfless not selfish. It's a unity that is fueled by love and not by hate. And that is the only future that is worthy of a people who are all siblings by virtue of being created in all their diversity in the Image of the Most High God.

And this is where our spiritual gifts have got to come in. And it's so beautiful because Paul starts talking about these spiritual gifts, and what is he talking about? Well, he's talking about diversity. There are a variety of gifts! There are a variety of services! There are a variety of activities! Diversity! Strength! Beauty! And there is One Spirit behind them all, bringing them together, activating them all in the body of Christ for the common good of all. Diversity and Unity!

The diversity of humanity and the unity of humanity come from the same source. They come from God. And it is well and good to look back to that source, to seek it out, to feel God's love. And the spiritual maturity that will begin in such reflection, the manifestation of the spiritual gifts that come from God demand at some point that the questions change from "Why am I here?" and "Where did I come from?" to "Where are we going? And what shall we do?"

With that in mind, I'm going to be working with our ministries to put together a Spiritual Gifts Inventory. The Spiritual Gifts Inventory will be a fun, relatively short form that you can fill out that will tell your church a little bit more about your gifts, your skills, your traits, your passions. And we will be using those inventories to figure out a way to get you involved in furthering the mission of our church, in ways that are fulfilling to you as an individual and that will draw you into the unity of our diverse community. I predict it's going to come out in February sometime. I hope when it does that you'll fill it out as a way of connecting your diversity to God's unity and raising your hand as someone who is interested in working with God for a better unity and a brighter future.

If we value both unity and diversity, we can't—we won't—give our allegiance to anything less than the Whole. Don't give your allegiance to anything less than God. Don't let your future be determined by anything less than the Spirit of God activating your unique gifts. Don't let your future be determined by fear, by hate, by selfishness or despair. Give yourself to God, not in showy piety, not in private spirituality, not by lashing out at the world, give yourself to God by manifesting the gifts of the Spirit, and using them to further God's Kingdom. Don't you want to be a part of that sacred diversity? Don't you want to be a part of that holy unity?