

HONORING OUR DIVERSITY
2) A Place at the Table

Rev. Ron Dunn

November 20, 2016

It is not an unfamiliar tale...Faced with mounting harassment and the ominous threat of persecution, a group of men, women and children decided that they had no future in their homeland. In fear and desperation, they crowded aboard a boat that would take them to the open sea and hopefully, to a new land of freedom and opportunity. Leaving the life that they had known, not to mention, most of their possessions, these refugees embarked upon a dangerous journey that would cost many of them their lives.

When the welcome sight of land finally appeared, the company of survivors rejoiced. Against all the odds, they had made it. They had braved wind and sea and storm and the surging breakers that threatened to sweep them away. When they finally set foot in the new land, these immigrants, better known to us and to history as the "Pilgrims," were convinced that they had found the home that they were looking for.

But it was, of course, not really their home. It belonged to the **Pokanokets**, the **Wampanoags**, and the **Naragansett** tribes who had lived there for centuries. While the initial points of contact between the native people and the immigrants were understandably tense, there were some positive signs of the possibilities before them. Living on the cusp of starvation, this Pilgrim band could have been easily crushed by either by armed force or by the ravages of hunger had it not been for the gracious intervention of the native people who not only supplied them with food, but taught them how to farm and to survive in the bitter winters of North America.

On this, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I'm thinking about what is often referred to as the first Thanksgiving Feast that took place in the fall of 1621. It was a feast that was shared between the fifty surviving pilgrims and approximately 100 of the Pokanokets tribe. While it was a meal that was, in many respects, a potluck affair, it was the Native American people who brought the main dish—in the form of five freshly killed deer. And what a feast it must have been! Although it is difficult to know just exactly took place in that initial gathering, what we do know that there was, in the experience of this shared feast, the opportunity to lay a foundation of understanding and harmony between two very different cultures and two very different races.

Sadly, as we all know, it was not to be. That initial feast and the hope that it may have generated, served only as precursor to the conflict and destruction that would follow. Ultimately, the lust for land and the pursuit of selfish interests made it impossible for this story to end well. In time, those who had come to this land as refugees, found themselves the victors in the struggle with those who had welcomed them and they, of course, would be the ones who would dictate the terms of history...a history whose legacy we still struggle with today.

In this the second of our two part series on Diversity, I begin by referencing the first Thanksgiving because it still represents, in my thinking, a dream worth pursuing--a dream

of life and relationship as God intends for it to be. It is not by accident that Jesus uses the metaphor of a great feast to illustrate the nature of the kingdom of God. Note, if you will, that it is a feast in which **EVERYONE** is invited, no one is to be turned away. All are welcome to sit down at the table that God has set. This, says, Jesus, is what the Kingdom of God is like. It's like a feast where everyone is welcome and everyone has a place at the table. Can you imagine what that would be like?

In a world such as ours, it is often quite difficult to imagine such a possibility. It seems, that all too often, that powerful glimpse of heaven gets clouded over by the many and various ways that we, as human beings, try to revise or rewrite the invitation that Jesus extended. For reasons too numerous to mention, it seems that we are consistently reluctant to embrace **the other**; the **other** who is different from us—the **other** who has a different color of skin, a different cultural viewpoint, a different religious perspective. There was a time in which some believed that we were living in a “post racial society,” one that had actually evolved beyond the debilitating issues of race that we experienced several decades ago. Yet, I think that it is fair to suggest that, in the wake of a string of police shootings and the frustrated and angry responses of various communities the race issue of race has not been resolved and, in fact, still divides us.

Race, however, is not the only issue that divides us. Culture, Religion and Gender are areas in which we find ourselves divided as well.

In recent years, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, there is the growing suspicion and hostility of some who believe that Muslims cannot be trusted and should not be welcomed into this country.

In the workplace, there is still the struggle for equality between men and women. The cry for “equal pay for equal work” is one that captures the anger and frustration of a number of women.

These, of course, are but a few examples of the issues that divide us as a people **Race... Religion...Culture...and Gender.** These are so often the areas in which our fear and suspicion take root, the areas that, tragically, can serve as breeding grounds for Racism...Nationalism, Cultural and Religious-ism (if that is a word). These are the “isms” that threaten to unravel the fabric of the trust, the respect and the understand that is so essential to a healthy society.

So it is that we find ourselves living in a very precarious time, one in which it is not a stretch to suggest that our future as a people is hanging in the balance. Like it or not, we are tied together, bound together in this national family that we share.

As Martin Luther King once observed, “**We may have all come on different ships, but we are all in the same boat now.**” Indeed, we are all in the same boat and we will either ride the waves of change into a new and exciting future, or we will begin to take on water and sink beneath the weight of our prejudice, intolerance and hatred. This is the critical choice that is before us.

There is, however, another reason for making the choice to recognize, respect and honor the other and it has little to do with our preservation as people. Instead, it has everything to do with the wisdom and instruction of our faith. As those who would call ourselves, “Christians,” our calling could not be more clear. Jesus was, without question, one who chose to defy the conventional wisdom of his segregated day by choosing to ignore the customs and the practices that often divided people up into “clean” and “unclean,” Jew or Greek, slave or free.

Instead of accepting or accommodating the rituals and the regulations that legally separated people from one another, he openly defied those rituals and regulations by hanging out with those deemed unworthy and unsavory. Perhaps his most irritating and upsetting tactic was to sit down at table with those whom, according to the law, he was supposed to avoid: tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners, and anyone who failed to keep all of the religious observances.

How ironic that the table became a symbol of Jesus’ defiance of a system that was built on the power of exclusion. By breaking bread with the marginalized, by rubbing elbows with the excluded, by listening to those who had been shunned and shamed, Jesus was announcing the new ground rules of the Kingdom of God—ground rules designed not to exclude, but to include any and all who chose to attend the feast that God had prepared.

The author of Ephesians captures this understanding of the significance of Jesus’ witness and message in his letter to the early church. There was, in this Christian community, a deep division between Jews and Gentiles as they struggled to understand themselves and their church in light of the witness of Jesus. The old legacy of the Jewish law and its bias in favor of the Jew and the Jewish way of life had created painful conflict that threatened the future of the fledgling Church. With powerful prose, the writer addresses this challenge head on: **“But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off (the Gentiles) have been brought near by the blood of Christ (his witness of love on the cross). For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”** Ephesian 2: 13-14

It was an astonishing thought for those entrenched in their racial, religious and cultural bias. They were so used to using the lens of exclusion to view the other who was different, that they, no doubt, found this teaching a bit much to grasp and certainly difficult to swallow. But there it is in bold declaration: **Christ has broken down the dividing wall of hostility that has separated us.** What a radical thought! Not only at that time, but also, at this time of deep division and mistrust.

Christ has broken down the wall of hostility that divides us. This is the bold and marvelous declaration of the writer of Ephesians. Impressive, isn’t it? The question is, “do you believe it?” And if you believe it, are you willing to support this premise through the witness of your own life and the relationships you share with others?

Before you answer that, allow me to suggest that this is not a question that should be answered too quickly or easily. To answer this question truthfully will ask something of us.

It will ask us to examine ourselves; our motives, our attitudes, and the places where we may harbor feelings of fear or resentment about the other—the one who is not known to us. It will ask us to look deeper and think deeper rather than merely being satisfied to offer the casual summation that, “I’m not a racist...or I’m not prejudiced...or I don’t harbor a bias.”

Sometimes, racism tends to thrive under the guise that passionately denies its possibility. We need to look at ourselves and to be honest with ourselves as we ask God to help us in the process of examining ourselves and our true motives. That, I think, is an important first step. But it is not the only step. You see, the choice to move beyond our fear, our uncertainty and our suspicion of the other is something that we cannot do by ourselves. It is something that we need others—especially the others that are different from us—to help us with.

Jim Wallis, in his book entitled, “America’s Original Sin—Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America,” suggests that if we ever hope to move beyond our current racial divide, we must find ways to know the other; to look into their eyes, to listen to their story and to feel what they feel. Until we take the time to do that, we will be dealing in abstract concepts and theories that do little to persuade us to use a different lens toward the problem of race.

It is only the pain that is personalized, only the hurt that you can feel in the heart of another, only the hope that you can in their eyes—that has the power to bring about true change and transformation in our society.

Last Sunday evening, I could see and feel this change at work within us as we listened to the panel of Muslim speakers as they shared their personal stories and their religious perspectives. And as we listened and learned and came to know them, I could feel our fear dissipate, our suspicion diminish, and our trust and hope begin to build. It was, I feel, powerful and very positive evening.

It was, I think, a small step, but a needed one—one that points us in the right direction. I look forward to taking more steps in this direction with you. I truly believe that there is not more important work that we could be doing together. In a world that so often finds itself divided by difference and diversity, we have the assignment of working together to tear down the dividing wall, to welcome the stranger, include the outcast and accept the one who is different.

It is our assignment to discover in the gift of our diversity, the unity that enable us to grow forward together as we sit down at the feast that God has prepared. Red and yellow, black and white—we are all precious in God’s sight. If only we will learn to see it too. Amen.