The Beloved Community: Out of Many – One

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February 12, 2023

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

In today’s reading from the Epistles, we encounter Paul admonishing the quarrelsome Corinthians who have taken to fighting among themselves over which leaders are most worthy of their allegiance. Paul had spent eighteen months working to establish a church in Corinth, a wealthy and important city in Greece, and is obviously a bit frustrated that despite his best efforts to make it clear to this little band of converts to the Way that they are all equal before God and one another, they have nonetheless quickly taken to throwing up divisions among themselves.

These divisions have been exacerbated by the fact that they are beginning to invest an outsized amount of power and authority in human leaders. Paul makes clear that both he and Apollo are but mere servants doing God’s work. They may have helped to plant seeds and water the garden, but it’s God that gives the increase. To quote Paul, “For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field; you are God’s building.” The foundation of the garden, the foundation of the building is God, and God alone. There is one master gardener and one master builder, and that is God. In relation to God, we are all laborers.

Later in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses another effort by the Corinthians to sort themselves into groups in a way that privileged certain groups over others. This time the issue was gifts of the Spirit. Paul was particularly concerned that those who spoke in tongues considered themselves spiritually superior to those who didn’t have this ability. In Corinthians Chapter 12 he writes:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and here are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Therefore, every gift, no matter how seemingly small or insignificant, is important and needed. Here the metaphor for this equality before God and before one another is not a garden or a building; it’s a body. As Paul explains, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

In these three metaphors — garden, building and body — Paul emphasizes not only the equality of their constituent parts, but also their interconnectedness. The sum of the parts is greater than the whole. A hammer, nails and a pile of wood lying side by side, not interacting, are nothing more than a hammer, nails and a pile of wood. But apply hammer to nail to wood, and you have transformed these three objects into more than the sum of their parts; you have transformed them into a building. These concepts of equality and interconnectedness are what lie at the heart of the Rev Dr Martin Luther King’s call to become the Beloved Community.

Historian Fred Smith writes,

For King, the Beloved Community is the actualization of an inclusive human community. It is a mutually cooperative and voluntary venture of humans to assume a semblance of responsibility for their brothers and sisters. … King describes the Beloved Community as a vision of total interrelatedness. It is solidarity of the human family. Because people are dependent on each other and are knitted together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.

Yet from the very beginning of what some claim to be a Christian nation, the slave economy on which the United States was built made a cruel mockery of the notion that we are all siblings, equal in the eyes of one another and of the God who created us all. As Elizabeth Wilkerson explains in her groundbreaking book, *Caste*, the United States was, in effect, organized into a caste system, in which some groups were privileged over others based on the color of their skin. It was a system in support of an economic model that depended on the exploitation of people and nature, undergirded by a religious system that claimed it was all part of a divinely ordained plan.

But the God who makes a way out of no way, remained unbound by the principalities and powers that conspired against the flourishing of all to the benefit of the few, and throughout the history of the United States, there has been a counter-narrative rooted in the understanding we are stronger together then divided. That counter-narrative manifested itself in actions such as Bacon’s Rebellion in in 1676 when former indentured servants, free Blacks, Blacks who were enslaved and newly arrived landless immigrants from England, Scotland and Ireland — all of whom toiled side by side in the tobacco fields of Virginia — rose up against their mutual oppressors, the landed gentry, in what was ultimately a failed effort to secure better working and living conditions. Bacon’s Rebellion resulted new laws designed to ensure that Black people and White people would never make common cause again.

This counter-narrative was seen once again during Reconstruction when poor White farmers joined together with Black freedmen in a political alliance aimed at breaking the political grip of southern plantation owners by providing debt relief, raising taxes to build public schools and engaging in other pursuits that benefited the majority of southerners regardless of their skin tone. This “fusion” political movement would soon be crushed with a vengeance, but the lessons of what could be achieved when people worked across racial lines remained.

In the book, *A More Perfect Union: A New Vision for Building the Beloved Community*, author Adam Russell Taylor writes that the vision of the Beloved Community, in which our “diversity as a community and nation is seen as a strength, not a weakness” is an old story, but it’s also a new narrative “with the potential to inspire and unite Americans across generational, geographic, racial and religious divides.” But this new narrative, unlike the old one which said White makes right, is rooted in the truth, and it begins with an honest recounting of the past, combined with a commitment to repair what has been broken. Only then can a firm foundation be established for true human flourishing.

Part of this honest retelling of the past is to acknowledge the ways in which the perpetuation of White supremacy has hurt all of us. In her groundbreaking book, the *Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*, economist Heather McGhee shows the collateral damage to White people of a political and economic system predicated on a “zero sum” mentality in which White people fear that gains by people of color will result in a loss for them. While she doesn’t specifically speak in terms of the “Beloved Community,” she does talk about the “Solidarity Benefit” that happens when White People and people of color have made common cause in pursuit of greater economic and social justice in which the whole is greater than the parts.

As followers of a God who makes a path where there is no path, whose Spirit flows where it will despite our best efforts to contain it, we know that past does not have to be prologue. But in order for us to chart a new future of true human flourishing, we need to understand at the most fundamental level that we are all in this together, and that my flourishing is dependent on your ability to flourish as well.

We also need to cultivate a new set of tools, ones that help to reinforce the idea that in human society, as in the rest of the natural world, a lack of diversity is recognized as a marker of a dying, not a thriving community. One of these tools is storytelling. Are we telling a story of us-versus-them, or are we telling a story of us?

In a *More Perfect Union*, Taylor notes that, although never codified into law, the informal motto of the United States was “E Pluribus Unum” or “Out of Many, One” until 1956, when Congress adopted “In God We Trust” as the official motto. Taylor argues that this change marked a significant lost opportunity to potentially construct a narrative that celebrated the importance of diversity. He explains that the “older motto was inspired in part by the words of Roman statesman and philosopher Marcos Tullius Cicero who wrote ‘When each person loves the other as much as himself it makes one out of many.’”

But unity does not mean sameness. It does not mean a melting pot. It means, in a metaphor shared with the anti-racism mission group by Pastor Darryl! (who was our preacher last week), a delicious fruit salad in which each piece of fruit retains its unique flavor, color and texture while playing off the unique flavors, colors and textures of the other fruit in the bowl. Similarly, as Taylor writes,

our oneness as a nation is also not found in a single culture, language or place or origin, but rather in shared ideals, values, and aspirations, as well as in God’s commandment that we love one another as we love ourselves.

It’s always struck me as rather curious that we readily recognize the importance of diversity in the natural world where the health of an ecosystem is dependent on its diversity. If all the plants or all the animals were the same, the ecosystem would soon perish. And yet, we don’t see that same understanding translate into human interactions where for much of the history of our country, White people have constructed communities that have effectively shut out everyone else not sharing their same skin color in the mistaken notion that human thriving is predicated on sameness not diversity.

We should not be under any illusion that building the Beloved Community will be easy. As someone once quipped, it’s easy to love people in theory, it’s loving them in practice that’s difficult. But the good news is that liking someone is not a prerequisite to loving them, or at least loving them in the way that is needed for the Beloved Community to become a reality. For that kind of love is not about feelings; it’s about wanting the best for another person regardless of what you may feel about them personally. Jesus called us to love our enemies; he didn’t require us to like them. The kind of love that undergirds the Beloved Community is not sentimental; it understands exactly what it’s up against, and it stays around for the long haul.

For the Beloved Community, like a garden, is a labor of love over years, perhaps generations. Those who labor in the garden planting seeds know they may never see the flowers that will grow from the seeds they plant, but they continue planting seeds nonetheless. Others may never plant any seeds, but rather they happen along when the shoots have started to poke their heads out of the soil, and their task is to water the seeds they have not sown. Others may come along when the flowers are in full bloom and their task is to prune and fertilize. Still others may happen upon the garden after a raging storm, when the flower beds lie in ruins and the garden seems lost. And so, the planting must begin anew.

At Eighth Day, our commitment to the Beloved Community is reflected in our membership commitment where we affirm that we will

use our resources of time, money and energy to help build a world of inclusiveness, love and equity while joyfully affirming that we are called to a life of love that includes all of God’ creatures.

But this commitment is just the first step, and the Beloved Community is ultimately created through action, through the sowing, watering and fertilizing of seeds. Recently, some of those seeds have included the use of more inclusive words and images in our liturgies, the willingness to engage in sometimes uncomfortable conversations about race, and our partnership with Mamatoto Village during Advent. The challenge before us now is how to continue to cultivate those seeds so that our garden continues to grow into a beautiful, lush garden where plants of every size, shape and color can flourish. I think it’s okay if we don’t necessarily have all the answers right now. If we remain faithful to the vision of the Beloved Community, then the answers will come in due time. For we are, after all, the laborers, not the Master Gardner. And for that I am most grateful.

Amen and Alleluia.