

“Embracing Diversity: What Do We Really Mean?”

Genesis 1.26-27; Revelation 7.9; Galatians 3.26-28

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The past week and a half since the election have been very difficult here in the United States of a divided America. Protests broke out in dozens of cities, turning violent in places like Portland and Chicago; many Trump voters found themselves accused of being “racists” and “bigots” and “misogynists”; some students at DeWitt Junior High School were victims of racial bullying; two swastikas were spray-painted on the windows of a storefront in Albion; an online petition at the University of Michigan charged that the university president was creating an environment that was marginalizing students who voted for Trump and making them feel unsafe; 169 members of the House of Representatives asked the President-Elect to rescind his appointment of Steve Bannon as chief strategist and senior counselor because of perceived racism and anti-Semitism; and so much more. Many friendships have been ruptured; some family relations have become strained; many minorities are wondering about their safety, despite the fact that the President-Elect won 29% of the Hispanic vote, 29% of the Asian vote, and 37% of the other, non-white, non-black vote. And every morning, at the start of the school day, students around the country hear that we are still “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” It sure hasn’t felt like we’re *one nation*, has it? Or *indivisible*, either.

In the wake of the election, I’ve found myself reflecting on our congregation’s mission statement. Every week, we affirm that we are a “Christ-centered” congregation that “embraces diversity.” You all created that mission statement before I arrived; it predates me. I used to think “embracing diversity” meant *one* thing. Experience has taught me that it means something different.

We have people here who voted for Donald Trump. We have people here who voted for Hillary Clinton. We have people here who voted for Gary Johnson or other third-party candidates. We have at least one person who chose not to vote for any of the available choices. This was a tough election. And *you are all welcome here*. We don’t force you, or pressure you, to vote a certain way. There are some churches that pride themselves on being conservative, and others that pride themselves on being liberal. In both kinds of churches, everyone pretty much thinks the same way. We’re not like that. We have people all over the political spectrum – *and that’s okay*. That’s one of the things I enjoy about this congregation. It sometimes leads to really interesting conversation. It also means I have to be very careful in my preaching because I know that no matter what I say, whether left, right, up, down, north, south, east, or west, guaranteed, *somebody* isn’t going to like it. You all may not *look* like a diverse congregation – but you *are* a diverse congregation. You don’t agree about much of *anything!*

Except ... hopefully ... a few things. That Jesus Christ is Lord. That he is your Savior, and mine. *Anybody* who can affirm those beliefs is welcome here. It doesn’t matter what country you were born

in, what color your skin is, who you voted for, or any of the many other things that distinguish us from one another that don't have to do with matters of faith. Our church constitution says, "A congregation shall welcome all persons who trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the fellowship and ministry of his Church. No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to profession of faith. The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel."

When you look at our scriptures, it is *very clear* that *every person on the face of this planet* was made by God, and in the image of God. White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American – *all* of us. Even if we don't all *worship* the same God, we were *made* by the same God, in the *image* of God. That's very clear in Genesis 1; it's reinforced again in Genesis 10, the Table of Nations, which proclaims loudly and clearly that we are *all* members of *one human family*, no matter what we look like. God created *all* of us. The way we treat other members of the human race should *always* be grounded in the knowledge that everyone else was created by God in the image of God *no more* and *no less* than we were.

God chose one *particular* group of people, one small portion of the human family, for a special relationship: the descendants of Jacob, the children of Israel. For fifteen hundred years, give or take, God's "chosen people" was this group of middle-Easterners. At times, they married people from other nations (Boaz the Israelite married Ruth the Moabite), and even people from other races (Moses' second wife was a black woman from Africa). At other times, like when they were rebuilding Jerusalem after the exile, marriages with non-Israelites were forbidden, out of a concern for national security. In time there developed a group of people called the Samaritans, who were considered half-breeds because of their mixed ancestry, and by the time of Jesus the Samaritans were feared and despised, because they were ... well, *different*. Yet Jesus showed grace to the Samaritan woman at the well, and told the story of the Good Samaritan to remind his followers that sometimes people of different ethnicity might be doing a better job following God's ways than we are. There is *nothing* in scripture that even *remotely* suggests that any race is inherently better than, or morally superior to, any other.

Many of God's so-called "chosen people" rejected Jesus and the people who proclaimed his name, which opened the door for God's blessings to pour out on all the rest of humanity. When the Spirit of God descended in tongues of fire on the day of Pentecost, people from *all over* the known world were recipients of God's good news, not just Palestinian Jews. Jesus had told his followers to "make disciples of *all nations*" (Matthew 28.19). Philip comes across an Ethiopian eunuch – a black African – eager to learn about God; the man joyfully receives the gospel and is baptized. Peter meets a God-fearing Roman centurion – a white European – and realizes that "God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him." (Acts 10.34-35) Paul triumphantly proclaims, "there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3.28) John of Patmos has a vision of Jesus on his throne, surrounded by a great crowd from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Revelation 7.9). In time the gospel message reached Asia, and eventually the Americas. One of the hallmarks of Christianity through the centuries is that we *habitually* embrace people of different races or ethnicities! Except ... when we haven't. There are times we have abandoned the gospel teaching, and let racism creep in. There are times we have failed to embrace diversity. There are times we have misrepresented the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Diversity is not just about race and ethnicity. There's diversity of religion. Are we called to *embrace* people of other religions, and if so, what does that look like? What would it mean to embrace

Hindus, for example? They don't worship the same God we do, but they were made by God, in the image of God. Most of us would at least want to be civil to them, to treat them with respect, as human beings. But does that mean we embrace what they believe? Do we adopt a philosophy of "I'm okay and you're okay"? Do we think we're all going to end up in the same place in the afterlife, regardless of what we believe? Or is faith in Christ necessary for salvation? Does Christ somehow save non-Christians too? What would motivate you to share your faith with a non-Christian? What about Christians who hold radically different views than we do? Should we embrace, for example, the members of the Westboro Baptist Church – that congregation that demonstrates at churches and funerals around the country, holding up signs that say "God hates [certain groups of people]"? What about people who believe that whites are superior to people of other races – should we embrace *them*? I know a pastor who was serving a Presbyterian church in Arkansas when he discovered that three members of his Session were members of the Ku Klux Klan. What should he have done? *Embrace* them? Or *confront* them? When do we say "I'm okay and you're okay," and when do we say, "That's not right"?

There are other kinds of diversity. Some members of our society are physically handicapped, have learning disabilities, or eating disorders. Others identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Some people suffer from terrible diseases. Others are compulsive gamblers, alcoholics, or drug users. Still others have been convicted of serious crimes, like serial killers and child molesters. Are we ever called to embrace *them*? Would that *condone* what they did? There are nearly a million people on the sex offender registry. About a quarter of them are on there because of things they did before they turned 18. They've all been branded with a modern-day scarlet letter. Yet what would Jesus have done? How would *he* have treated them? This was the man who offered grace to prostitutes, when no one else would. This was the man who said to the woman caught in adultery: "Go, and sin no more." If *he* can forgive the repentant sinner, if *he* can embrace the prodigal son or daughter, shouldn't *we*?

We say we "embrace diversity" here at Mason First Presbyterian Church. That means we need to extend the love of Christ to *all* people. But it doesn't mean that we embrace all *beliefs* or all *behavior*. We also affirm that we are a "Christ-centered congregation." That means we need to strive to live by the values of Jesus Christ. That means we need to proclaim the truth of the gospel, even when people don't want to hear it. There are times we need to say "No," "I disagree," or even, "That's not right." Christianity is not an "I'm okay – you're okay" religion. It's a "Jesus Christ is Lord!" religion. Jesus Christ is, *still*, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and we can not, must not, *ever* abandon that, no matter what society around us says. But how we *present* that truth to other people matters. Sometimes, we Christians can come across as very judgmental, as "holier than thou." That attitude can turn people off from the very message we are trying to proclaim. People have to know that *we* submit ourselves to God's rule too, that *we* ourselves are not free from sin, that *we* ourselves are continually striving to grow in the ways of Jesus Christ, ever and always trying to get our *own* beliefs and behaviors more in line with Christ's will for our lives. That's why we also affirm that we "foster spiritual growth" here at Mason First Presbyterian Church. We *all* need to be growing in the ways of Jesus Christ. None of us *is* Jesus; none of us is pure and unblemished and free from sin; none of us has reached a point where we can afford to stop learning, stop repenting, stop trying to embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ in all its fullness. So we *do* embrace diversity, extending the love of Christ to *all* people. But we *also* foster spiritual growth, so we can become more Christ-like in our own beliefs and behavior. And, above all, we are *Christ-centered*. Jesus Christ is Lord ... forever and always. *Nothing* can ever change that. *Nothing!*

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