

Sermon by Rev. Das Sydney, Highland Baptist Church, Kitchener, July 7, 2019

“Division and Unity” based on John 17: 20-13

Deep in the Shenandoah Valley, bounded by the Appalachians and the Blue Ridge Mountains are a number of rural communities called the Shenandoah Deutsch. In that pristine, Eden-like environment, in the mid-1800's, were two Christian groups who quietly worshiped and raised their children and made a living off the land. There were the Mennonites and the German Baptist Brethren also known as the Dunkers. They spoke the same language; they wore plain garb; the men had long beards without a moustache and no buttons on their jackets. The women had prayer coverings and bonnets. They spoke German among themselves but English to the outside world. To the casual observer, they both looked like Amish. They were like peas in a pod.

Both groups were abolitionists, strange for Baptists at that period and both groups spent time in the same jails. Leaders of both groups were executed by the Confederate armies for their care of blacks. Their hearts were filled with compassion except for each other. Their books and writings dripped with insults and were acidic to the core about the other group. What did they disagree about?

The Mennonites practiced pouring for baptism and the Baptists, the Dunkers, would dunk the people, forwards, three times, into the river. Such bitter acrimony is appalling but nothing new.

Augustus Toplady, the minister who wrote, Rock of Ages was a Calvinist, and he called Wesley guilty of Satanic shamelessness. John Wesley, the English Reformer, also like his brother Charles, a prolific hymn writer of such deep pietistic hymns as, Jesus Lover of My Soul, said Toplady was a cheap chimney sweep. We are not prone to such colourful language in our time but there remains a deeply rooted suspicion, of two modern movements – the evangelical Christians and the Christian left.

It seems we must always have an enemy, some kind of “other” from which we derive our identity. Through the centuries, the scapegoats have been the Jews and even people we have regarded as great Christians have been antisemitic. The only time when antisemitism released its hold was during the Crusades, when the enemies were the Moors, the Arabs.

We are surprisingly open to any strong argument for our side's superiority versus the “other,” be it a faith, race, country or political party. By the time you come to the 19

Century, most denominations felt pretty smug that they had hold of the truth, theirs was the real faith. They were the only ones right about Baptism, or right about Communion. Others simply were misguided or corrupted. Our prejudices led to suspicion, even hatred and violence. And so said the Salvation Army, we will no longer practice those rites which divide us. We will not have baptism or communion. And the people of the Salvation Army are the finest of Christians.

Those rites did not define a Christian. Being a Christian is being in love with Christ, and all these other things are secondary. We honour Jesus' prayer, "May they be one", when we are able to rise above denominationalism. Thank goodness we have come to such an understanding and we support one another, and pray for one another, whatever our theological proclivities, as you do in this community church.

Could it be, when Jesus prayed, "May they be one", we must apply that teaching to the local church. It is division there that so devastatingly mars its witness, and leads to decline and disillusionment. But how easily we can be divided. It happened in the early church.

In Corinthians, we read that there was one faction that supported Paul, another Peter, and another, Apollos and of course, the most righteous one, or self-righteous – the Jesus group. And Paul says, Is Christ divided? They were all vying for influence, authority and power and dividing the local church. In our day, the church does not need any help to slide downwards.

Bishop William Willimon tells about his first parish out of seminary in a rural area in North Georgia. The first visit he made to one of the churches in the parish, he found a large chain and padlock on the front door put there, he was told, by the local Sheriff. "The Sheriff, why?" he asked. "Well, things got out of hand at the last board meeting," he was told by one of the members. "Folks started ripping up carpet," the member said, "dragging out the pews they had given in memory of their mothers. It got so bad the Sheriff came out and put that lock on the door until a new preacher could come and settle things down."

"That," says Willimon, "rather typified my time at that church. I would drive out there each Sunday, just praying for a miraculous snowstorm in October which would save me from another Sunday at that so-called church. I spent a year there," he says, "that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, I planned, I taught, I pled but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take."

One year serving that parish was all he could take. On his last Sunday there, he muttered to himself, "You call yourself a church!" He got in his car, slammed the door, and his tires kicked gravel up in the parking lot, as he sped out of the place.

Someone said, there is no fight like a church fight. And there have been church splitting fights, over the smallest things. In one church, it was whether they could have fake flowers on the communion table. Another fought over which picture of Jesus to hang in the foyer. One Sunday, the communion preparation team decided on Cranberry/grape, rather than grape juice. It is not surprising people become so terribly disillusioned with the church. Yes, we are part of the Body of Christ but so many of the passions of the world are still with us such as competitiveness, rancor, jealousy, greed, pride and unbridled anger.

The German philosopher, Schopenhauer, compared us to porcupines trying to nest together on a cold winter's night. We crouch toward one another because we need the heat of other bodies to survive. Yet, the closer we huddle, the more we prick each other with our porcupine quills. And, as Jesus indicates, it is most often those who are closest to us, our "brother" or our "sister," who feel the pain of our presence, and we theirs.

Jesus prays: "May they be one even as you Father and I are one!" That is a high standard for anyone to achieve. Jesus connects the unity he prays for to the unity in the Godhead. Richard Rohr calls it a Divine Dance. There are three unique individuals but working with an amazing unity.

The members of the Trinity are like three people sitting around a small round table. Each person has his own name plate. And there is complete trust which flows between them, which is reliable, constant and true. They are completely one – why? Because of the love they share. That is the glue that holds them together.

And there is a third consideration. We derive this from the context of the passage. Jesus was speaking to the disciples who were diverse in every way, politically and ethnically. You remember Nathaniel's outburst about Jesus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth." They had their prejudices, and bigotry and a provincial outlook. Many were unlettered fishermen. In that motley bunch was a tax-collector, a support of Herod and Caesar. And there was a zealot fighting to take down the government.

And in His teachings and actions, he reached out to people beyond the boundaries of Israel. In his first sermon in Nazareth as he started talking about his mission, the people received him gladly. He was their favored hometown boy. They said admiringly, Is this not Joseph's son, until he mentioned the Syrians whom God had favoured, over the needy in Israel (the widow of Zarephath and Naaman, the Syrian general). At that point, their fury could not be contained, and they tried to throw him off a cliff.

Perhaps we are drawn to people most like ourselves, who speak the same language, dress the same, do similar work, same kinds of educational level. We have more to talk about. That makes it a challenge for us in Canada. We are a potpourri of people from every part of the world of different colours and cultures. Christena Cleveland who is mixed race – black and white, a social psychologist and theologian, at Duke, says,

*The primary problem is that our identities are too small.  
We tend to rely most on our smaller, cultural identities  
and ignore our larger, common identity  
as members of the body of Christ. . . .  
Indeed, adopting a common identity is the key  
to tearing down cultural divisions  
and working toward reconciliation.*

The hurts and injuries inflicted on the other go back a long long way. Think of the blacks who were United Empire Loyalists and fought for the British in the war for Independence. They were promised good farming land but were given the in-arable stony ground called Hammonds Plains outside Halifax. In the churches, they had no say. The “coloured section” was in the balcony, or certain cordoned off sections, near the back of the church. It is no surprise they formed their own churches in the Maritimes and South-West Ontario.

We cannot change history or the location and make-up of our own particular church, but I am grateful for the new wave of churches, which are both strong and incredibly diverse. They are moving in a different direction than those of the alt-right and neo-Nazi perspectives, which pitch arguments for superiority, and racial purity.

You can understand that for me, there is a personal investment to the direction of our society and world. I take heart in the dreams and passions, of those, who can see we are a part of the same human family.

When I was in High School, in Ghana, I had to read, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, written by Alan Paton in the late 50's. Paton was a white man, born in Natal South Africa and at University, trained to be a teacher, and priest and later in life, went into politics, to try and bring some reform to the country.

He had the strength to stand against the tide and the intelligence to write persuasively. Many of his words are quite memorable. This was one of his prayers:

*“Let me not be afraid to defend the weak  
because of the anger of the strong,  
nor afraid to defend the poor  
because of the anger of the rich.”*

And this far-reaching insight,

*“When a deep injury is done us,  
we never recover until we forgive.”*

Perhaps that was the insight, which led Nelson Mandela to form the TRC, when he and the blacks were in power, choosing peace rather than bloodshed.

In the 50's, Paton had tried to form a multi-racial political party. It was promptly outlawed in apartheid South Africa. But he was on the right side of history. In the midst, of all this turmoil, he went to sleep exhausted tossing and turning, and then his wife shook him awake. "Wake up, wake up. You were yelling in your sleep." And he cried out, "There were people streaming to our little country parish church. Black and white and every other colour in between, hearing the words of invitation: (Cranmer) We do not presume to come to this thy Holy Table.

Tears were streaming down his face. There we were, singing together and saying the Lord's prayer. All the people, in their own language, all the colours under the South African sun. And his wife said to him gently, You must have been dreaming.

It is a dream that moves me because I know the pain that goes with exclusion. I remember when our middle daughter was starting school, grade 1 she found a friend, a little boy to play with at recess in that first week. A couple of days later, she came home, mortified, in tears. His mother had said he could no longer play with her, because she was the same colour as their nannies' children. What do you say to a child 6 years old, still innocent and not yet self-aware? It was too early to talk about some harsh realities. Sunday rolled around and we were still smarting from the pain of what had happened. I served a church in Lawrence Park at the time, a church that was almost all white. Our daughter was standing around, waiting for worship to begin. And down the aisle came a woman, flamboyant, effusive and quite striking, with her white hair brushed back. She knew nothing of what had happened at school, but as she swept down the aisle, she saw our daughter and gathered her into a warm hug and whispered, You are my little lamb.

And our little girl asked us afterwards, Why did she call me a little lamb? But she knew she was loved and cherished. And we knew the redemptive power of a loving caring accepting community. There was the church at its best, building bridges, tearing down barriers and walls.

Jesus prays, "May they be one". Perhaps he was thinking of theologies yet to be formed. Perhaps he was thinking of personality types and preferences. Perhaps he was thinking of something far more primal, of tribe and race and all those walls and barriers, which separate. May we seek to be, even in small measure, an answer, to Jesus' prayer. May they be one, in our faith communities, in our local churches, and wherever we have influence. Amen.