

Uncomfortable Church: Uncomfortable Diversity
Ephesians 2:14-20
St. Mark's & St. James UCC ~ September 27, 2020
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You enter this realm at your own risk. Because it leads to a future of impossibility. Not a future that will be; but a future that might be. This is not a new future. It is simply an extension of imagined futures present since the beginning of cognizant humanity.

It has patterned itself after every possible vision of standardization and homogeneity known to mankind since the beginning of time. It has refinements, technological refinements in the sophisticated approach to the obliteration of human diversity.

But, like every one of the realms of unimaginability that has preceded it, it has one iron rule. Multiplicity is an enemy and variety is a menace.

This is a realm of uniformity, sameness, and regulation where everyone thinks alike, looks alike, has the same desires and goals of life and where those who are different are cast aside and left outside the walls of comfort. This is the Twilight Zone...

A place where uniformity, sameness and regulation are prized and valued above all things; where uniqueness is considered an enemy;

This is indeed a look into the Twilight Zone.

Rod Sterling was the narrator and producer of this television series in the 50's. Each episode began with his description of some bizarre setting – a person's

dilemma, a time twisted back upon itself, a historical situation with a different outcome than what we know...

All played a part to describe what could be;

What, with the use of our imagination, might have been.

Each episode had a moral to its story and each held a mirror up to the face of humanity asking it to take a close look at itself.

The Twilight Zone.

Some undoubtedly would consider 2020 a year in the Twilight Zone.

(Play intro music to TZ)

Without a doubt it has been unusual, uncomfortable, tragic and equally without a doubt, a mirror has been held up before all of humanity and we've all had a good look at ourselves. Some with a very, very positive look and others, less so.

Our journey this morning has us looking into a realm where everyone looks alike, acts alike, thinks alike, and desires alike. It's not surprising to find that there is great comfort in this particular realm.

Martin Luther King Jr once pointed out that Sunday was the most segregated ~ most homogenous ~ most alike ~ day of the week.

And it's not a stretch of the imagination to say that church is more comfortable when you can do it among like-looking, like-minded, and like-everything people. This kind of church may *not* be better, but it's easier!

But, would it surprise you to know that homogeneity is not the biblical model for community or church that God wants for us?

In Genesis 11 is a most wonderful story – it's one of those that doesn't have a lot of description or explanation so there is some mystery that goes along with it.

It begins with these words:

“Now, the whole earth had one language and the same words.”

As people from far and near came together they settled on the plains of Shinar and began to build. With brick and bitumen they built a tower with its top in the heavens and said to themselves,

“Come, let us make a name for ourselves.”

Rather than to build an altar to God they made a monument for themselves. God’s response? Let them speak many different languages and scatter them around the world. Diversity ensued!

While that may be the first biblical reference to the importance of diversity it certainly isn’t the last.

Jesus clearly underscored the importance of bringing people together when he gathered an eclectic group of disciples with backgrounds of:

business owners,

fishermen,

one whose father was a king,

a tax collector,

a fanatical Jewish nationalist,

and a thief.

Paul time and again strove to break down the barriers of hatred and separateness by preaching and bringing together Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, man and woman into one body – the Body of Christ.

Thank God for this diversity! Because this tells us two things:

1) No matter who we are, God welcomes us into the Body of Christ. I can be of any nationality:

Afghan
Albanian
Algerian
Barbadian
Belgium
Burmese
Chinese
Congolese
Timorese
Japanese
Lebanese
Tongan
Tunisian
Chicago Bearsian
Yemini
Zimbabwean

I can speak any language, be of any color, come from a wealthy background or a dirt-poor background, have a doctorate degree or never have completed middle school. God loves me, no matter what.

2) This diversity is intentional. Because like we learned last week the body is made up of many different parts. Though we are many different parts we are designed by God to be **together** as the whole body!

And at the heart of this is not a tower to our own glory, but an altar to God's glory. Paul tells us,

“Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. And with his body (Christ’s sacrifice on the cross) he broke down the barrier of hatred that divides us.

He canceled out the rules of the Law that divided us so he could create one new body out of the two. He created a new person out of the two groups, making peace. And he reconciled them both as one body to God, by the cross, which ended their hostility and anger against one another.”

A we see a new family created! A multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-languaged, multi-hued, multi-aged family where we are empowered by God’s grace to not only reject the pride and prejudice that comes with homogeneity, but to seek it out and break down those barriers ourselves.

5 years ago, I was asked by the United Methodist Conference to be a part of an inaugural, yearlong program called the Institute for Congregational Development. I was one of almost 30 invited. We had speakers and lecturers from all over the US; we had field trips to growing, thriving churches in Kansas and Michigan.

And in general, the other clergy and church leaders looked pretty much like me. White, black or brown; pretty conservative clothes; an occasional tattoo – pretty unremarkable –

from the outside anyway!

At one lecture we were asked to break up and go to another table than the one we were sitting at, for some exercises we had to do. So I looked around.

Table after table there were those just like me! Clergy. Relatively cleanshaven, some spoke Spanish but mostly English. Everyone was pretty much dressed conservatively. So – I could go to a table full of Patricks. But, how helpful would

that be to me? How much could I really learn? What would be new and eye opening for me?

How boring really – a whole table of mes... 😊

Or I could go to this one table. Where someone was not quite like the others. Grian Hollies-Maxwell. She was a black woman. Her hair was a deep, rich pink color. She had earrings up and down both ears; a nose ring and a lip ring; eyes that were made up with many colors ~ topped off with long wavy eyelashes.

Her clothes were bright, colorful and she wore 3-4 necklaces.

And I didn't know her. So, I went to sit at *her* table. I found out she was a gourmet chef in Milwaukee. Her ministry dream and passion was to open an eatery serving healthy food to homeless and to provide (within this eatery) a sanctuary for people to feel safe, to pray and at certain times to have worship together.

She was one of the most fascinating people I've ever met. Her passion for ministry was strong and she was going to look the way she wanted to look and do ministry the way God was calling her – and it wasn't anything like what I was doing. Thanks be to God!

Think about this for a moment. What would it be like to go to church that has numerous Grian's in it – whatever form, fashion and passion for Christ that is?

That might be a setting, that might be a worship service, that might be a ministry... whatever it is you might need to ease into it and maybe it's not an every Sunday

setting – but can you see the new horizons opened by each unique calling and person?

Would it rejuvenate? Invigorate? Revitalize?

And probably exhaust, yeah! It would.

But if we could admit and intentionally work towards diversity even when we aren't always comfortable with it we might just find we have certain passions and callings in common that are closer to the biblical model of church given to us than to surround ourselves with 20-30-40 Patricks!

To do that we want to encourage listening and open conversation to understand how God is working in and through that person or situation or motion or influence...

I've shared this with you before – this beautiful quilt made by my first church in Wisconsin... way back when. Different patterns, tones, colors and textures... come together with fine stitching to give us an image of the Cross.

Would this have the same impact on us, if it were all one color, one pattern, one texture?

How would an entire quilt of beige give us the distinction of the cross?

How would one shade of red reflect the blood shed by Christ?

How would one dark square tell the story of Good Friday, the blood of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ?

They wouldn't would they?

This imagery needs diversity to better understand and see the big picture. Is it any different in our faith?