
I am, because of you
Martin Grove United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51

Today is the beginning of the week of prayer for Christian unity. Believe it or not, that is one event that - in part - drove me into professional ministry. Because after sitting through years of such celebrations, I came to two conclusions. One conclusion was that Christian unity was not likely to happen in my lifetime. The other conclusion was that “unity” services were always exceptionally boring. In my experience - perhaps in yours - “unity” services included sermons that were full of platitudes about loving each other, and completely unexplored generalizations and cliches. The sermons were always full of “nice” sounding words, apparently selected precisely because of their lack of power to effect any real change in our own lives. We all know that we should learn to get along with other people, so clearly, we should get along with other Christians. Christian unity is a no-brainer. Unfortunately, that seems to invite no-brainer sermons!

I still remember one such service when my children were small. In particular, I remember the children’s time that day. Ian was probably about 4. Young enough to stand on my legs in order to see better, and old enough to have his own opinions. By that point in his life he had spent at least a couple of years in a daycare with about 20 children from at least 15 different cultures and nationalities. And during the unity service, at the children’s time, there was a guest speaker who talked at length about unity, and the need for us to love other people, including people who were different than us, etc, etc, etc. And when the speaker was done, Ian turned to me and said, “duh”.

Why is it - I wonder - that a topic like Christian unity, a topic that is obviously important, can be so uninteresting to talk about. Is it because we fall back on platitudes? Is it because we resist seeing the barriers to real unity in our own lives and in our society? Is it because we think we are all open-minded already, and that unity will happen when the rest of the world catches up to us? Is it that we like to pretend we have this all figured out already?

“Unity” is actually a difficult idea to define, and an even harder idea to bring to life. Because - if we are honest - we recognize that Christians, across the world and across the ages display vastly different traditions, cultures, theologies, and values. And we struggle to accept some of those traditions, cultures, theologies, and values. If you don’t believe me - tell me this - those of you that pray for Donald Trump - do you pray that he will embrace his own faith more strongly, or do you pray that he will finally discover a faith that is more like your own, a faith that is more closely aligned with the gospel? Do you accept his vision of Christianity that includes conflict, hatred and fear, or do you declare that he really isn’t very Christian. I know what I do. I reject his version of Christianity. Where is the unity in that? Am I wrong? Is he wrong? Is Christian unity a bad idea? What exactly is the answer here?

The basic problem with us Christians - of course - is that we are human beings. I think it is very human to have biases. Here’s a simple experiment: How many of us have children? How many of us had children who went to school? How many of us have felt that our own children were “above average” at school? So most of us feel that our children were above average. Do you know what the word average means? We can’t all be above average. It is simply human nature to favour “our own” above people we don’t know, and that’s a barrier to unity.

In one study of medical students, they were asked how likely it was that they would be tempted by a bribe from a pharmaceutical company. 15% of the students felt they themselves might be tempted. Interestingly, the same students also felt that 85% of their class-mates would take a bribe. But the students were all from the same class. Which shows that people have biases. We believe that we are better than we are while at the same time we believe that people we don’t know are worse than they are. That sounds like human nature to me.

[discussion - biases in our society]

I think the problem is that in general it’s hard to be self-reflective, and also that as Canadians, we believe we are essentially open-minded, tolerant people. But even if that’s

mainly true, we still carry biases and preconceptions within. Biases we may not recognize. Sometimes our biases are more visible in our media, so we can always look there to see a reflection of ourselves.

One fascinating bias is what in Canada is called the “Ben Johnson syndrome”. It is a condition where Canadians become foreigners when they exhibit bad behaviour. The name of the syndrome is a reference to the fact that when the Canadian darling, Ben Johnson, ran the 100 m sprint in 9.79 seconds in 1988, he was a Canadian hero that was metaphorically painted red and white by our media. However, when it was discovered that he had in fact cheated, he instantly became “a Jamaican sprinter” in the press.

If the syndrome was restricted to running, we could probably live with it, but in fact it is an essential part of the Canadian fabric. For example, when a provincial political figure disapproved of a program to help new Canadians with their language skills, the politician referred to the program as a “subsidy for foreign workers”. In that case, Canadians - because they didn’t speak English very well - were dubbed “foreigners”.

And if the syndrome was applied to all people, we could probably live with that too, but some people and groups are exempt. When the Globe and Mail revealed in 2013 that Doug Ford sold hashish in the 1980’s as a sort of “home business”, Doug was never referred to as an “Irish drug dealer”. It’s actually hard to find any examples of the “Ben Johnson” effect applied to white people. So as Canadians we can’t even discuss racism without exhibiting racism ourselves. That sounds like human nature to me. Maybe this whole “unity” thing is harder than we like to think. Perhaps we are not as open-minded as we like to pretend we are.

I was going to give some examples of religious bias in our media, but there are simply too many examples now so I won’t. But we are all aware that in any kind of shooting, if the shooter is Muslim, our media immediately paints the person as a terrorist. Simple, right. But when Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people in his terrorist attacks in Norway in 2011, nobody jumped to the conclusion that all Christians are terrorists or that all Zionist are terrorists, or that all white people are terrorists, even though Anders was a white Christian Zionist. Why on earth do we jump to the conclusion that Islam is a

religion of terror? Is it just possible that we have a bias against Muslims, Islam, and the Qur'an?

If we do, it's odd, particularly given our reading from 1 Samuel this morning. The text we read is a lovely story about Samuel learning to recognize the voice of God. It's a gentle, heart-warming story. It's a great text for a sermon, because we can easily discuss how perhaps we ourselves miss the voice of God in our own lives, or we can discuss how other people sometimes help us recognize the voice of God in our midst. And that part of the story is lovely. But let me ask - how many of you have bothered to read the text that comes right after the part we read today? In the text we read, God finally gets Samuel's attention, but do you know what the actual message was? The message that "God" wanted to share with Samuel? In the text that follows, we get to hear the message that "God" had for Samuel. Surely that will be a lovely story too. Why doesn't our lectionary give us that story? The reason why the lectionary ignores the message from God is because of our own biases. Because in the text, the message from "God" to Samuel is a declaration that "God" will perform a terrorist attack. The idea of a terrorist "God" pre-dates Islam, but we are very good at ignoring that fact, and our lectionary simply dismisses the text.

I'm feel like I'm getting near the end here, and I feel like I haven't said much yet that sounds very hopeful. Where do we find hope here? I find hope in our gospel today. I find hope in the fact that we can change. If we learn to recognize our own biases, we can change. If we ignore our biases, nothing will change. But if we take our own biases to heart, we can grow.

In John, Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" At least Nathanael is obvious about his bias. And Philip responds, "come, and see". Philip does not tell Nathanael to stop being biased, Philip does not tell Nathanael that he is wrong. Philip simply invites Nathanael to open his heart and mind, to come, and to be open to discovering Jesus for who he is. That's probably the only antidote to discrimination anyway - Come and see for yourself. Come and see that we - and "the other" are not so different.

We can actually do this in real life. I have met a number of people over the past year who have expressed to me that Canada should ban burkas. And the main reason for that is fear. So I want to share with you that I have spoken with perhaps a dozen people in the past year who were wearing a burka or some other face-covering at the time. and I will admit to you that when I spoke to the first person, I did feel a bit strange. But that strangeness did not last very long. My sense of strangeness very quickly transformed into a sense of familiarity - the person I was speaking to was a human being after all. And after my first experience speaking to someone in a burka, I had no difficulty speaking to other people later. “Come and see” actually works. Interact with the people you are afraid of and you will quickly find you do not need to fear. Interact with the people that our media tells you to be afraid of, and you will quickly find you do not need to fear.

“Come and see” is a good start. Come and see will help us get past our fears. But I see even more hope than that. Because lack of unity springs from an unwillingness to see “the other” as we see ourselves. We need to embrace “ubuntu”. Ubuntu is an African word that does not easily translate, but it refers to how we ourselves becomes fully human through collective respect and valuing community above narrow self-interest. One expression of ubuntu is “I am human because I belong to the human community and I view and treat others accordingly”. I prefer a shorter version, “I am, because of you”, meaning that I cannot be complete in solitude. I cannot be complete without you. We cannot be complete without the other, including the global Christian community.

We should not strive to eliminate biases, because that would also eliminate our humanity. But we can strive to understand ourselves and others better, and to act accordingly. We can live past our own biases. We can try to live out ubuntu in our own lives.

I am, because of you. Come and see.

Amen.