
I am, because of you
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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

The week of prayer for Christian unity begins this Thursday. I'm not aware of any local events we are participating in, but I could not let it pass without comment. Believe it or not, the week of prayer for Christian unity 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" events were always exceptionally boring.

I always look forward to a stimulating sermon - even if I disagree with the preacher. But Christian unity sermons were usually a bundle of platitudes. Vague statements about loving each other. Unexplored generalizations and cliches. The sermons were always full of "nice" sounding words. But the words seemed to be selected precisely because of their lack of power to effect any real change in our lives. I mean, think about it. We all know that we should learn to get along with other people. So clearly, we should get along with other Christians. On the surface, Christian unity is a no-brainer. Unfortunately, celebrations of unity seem to invite no-brainer sermons!

I still remember one unity service when my children were small. Ian was probably about 3 or 4. Young enough to stand on my legs in order to see better, and old enough to have his own opinion. By that point in his life he had spent a couple of years in a daycare with about 20 children from at least 15 different cultures and nationalities. The unity message was presented by a guest speaker. The speaker talked at length about unity, and the need for us to love other people. Including - he kept emphasizing - people who were different than us. And when the speaker was finished, Ian turned to me and said, "duh". If you don't speak sarcastic child, "duh" means, well that was obvious and not even worth saying.

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?

Or 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. Is it because we prefer to pretend that there are no real differences between Christians?

“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, rituals, theologies, and even values. And we struggle to accept some of those traditions, cultures, theologies, and values as Christian.

If you think I’m being too extreme - do you remember Pastor Coots? Pastor Coots was a pentecostal pastor in Kentucky who made the news in 2014. He made the news because he died after being bitten by a rattlesnake. The death was tragic. But the shock for most people was learning that the rattlesnake was part of the Sunday worship service.

Pastor Coots’s church believed - and still believes - in the power of a liturgical ritual known as “snake handling” as part of worship. Now I’ve been with you all for well over a month, and not one of you has asked me when our next snake-handling services is.” I’m starting to wonder if maybe we don’t do that here. Christians are really not all the same. And if we want to talk about Christian Unity we have to start by acknowledging just how different we are.

Consider the Christianity preached by Donald Trump. Do you accept his vision of Christianity that is based on hatred, fear, and division. I reject his vision of Christianity. Am I wrong? Is he wrong? What should unity look like here? What exactly is going on?

The basic problem with 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 felt that our own children were “above average” at school? [Most parents will put up their hands] So most of us feel that our children were above average. Do you know what the word average means? Half of our children had be below average. That’s just how the math works. But almost everyone thinks that our own children are above average. It is simply human nature to favour “our own” above people we do not know. Fine. But that is a barrier to unity.

One 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. Biases we may not even 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 in Canada is what is called the "Ben Johnson Syndrome". It is a condition where Canadians become foreigners when they exhibit bad behaviour. The name is connected to the once Canadian darling, Ben Johnson. Johnson you remember was born in Jamaica but became a Canadian citizen. At the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Johnson ran the 100 m sprint in a record 9.79 seconds. When Johnson did that, he was declared a Canadian hero and was metaphorically painted red and white by our media. However, when it was discovered that he had in fact cheated, in the press he instantly became "a Jamaican sprinter".

If the syndrome was applied to all people equally, we could probably live with that. But some people and groups are exempt. In 2013 the Globe and Mail revealed that our current Premier Doug Ford sold hashish in the 1980's as a sort of "home business". The Canadians who supplied Ford with the drugs were quickly branded as "Somali drug dealers" But Doug was never referred to as an "Irish drug dealer". It is actually hard to find any examples of the "Ben Johnson" effect applied to white people. So as Canadians we cannot even discuss racism without being racist. Maybe this whole "unity" thing is harder than we like to think. And perhaps we are not as open-minded as we like to believe we are.

As Canadians, our biases are not just based on skin colour. They are based on religion too. We are all aware that in any kind of shooting, if the shooter is Muslim, our media immediately paints the person as a terrorist. In 2011 Anders Behring Breivik committed a terrorist attack in Norway killing 77 young people. The media labelled that as a terrorist attack for about 12 hours. But when it was discovered who the shooter was white, and a Christian Zionist, he was no longer called a terrorist. He became a person with a mental disorder. Why did the media not label all Christian Zionists as terrorists? Or label all white people as terrorists? It is truly insane that our media jumps to the conclusion that all Muslims are terrorists.

We have all seen this played out - again - with recent events in Palestine / Israel. Our media has no problem supporting people who declare that all Palestinians are terrorists and therefore deserve to die. I have some news for the media. A 2 year old cannot be a terrorist! In Gaza, less than 2% of the people support Hamas. But our government supports and is still complicit in the ongoing genocide of Palestinians. The only good news is that increasingly, Canadian citizens do not support it.

I was hoping I could rewrite that paragraph after events in the Hague this week. But no luck.

Even the authors of the lectionary fall prey to the Ben Johnson Syndrome, and a good example of that comes from 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 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 did you ever wonder why God wanted to get Samuel's attention? It's because God had a message for Samuel. Surely, the lectionary will give us that part next week, right? Not on your life. The lectionary will never ever include the message that Samuel received from God. And the lectionary will never ever do that because of our own biases.

Because the message from the "God" character to Samuel is a declaration that this "God" character is about to perform a terrorist attack on God's own people. The idea of a terrorist "God" pre-dates Islam but we are very good at ignoring that fact, and our lectionary simply ignores the part of the Bible that demonstrates God's genocidal nature.

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, or pretend we do not have any biases, nothing will change. But if we take our own biases to heart, we can grow. We can find the healing that we need.

In John, Nathanael says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" At least

Nathanael is up-front 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 lasting antidote to discrimination anyway - Come and see for yourself. Come and see that we - and “the other” are not so different. 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. Creating unity requires two things. One thing is to get past our own fears of “the other”. But the second part is to listen deeply to the other for new insights and teachings that they have to offer. This morning, I suggest we need to embrace an African teaching called “ubuntu”.

I know that some of you in this congregation are from Africa, so please let me know over coffee time what you think of my take on the teachings within ubuntu.

Ubuntu is a broad African philosophy. Although there are other names, in South Africa, the Zulu pronunciation is “ubuntu”. Ubuntu 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”. Another version is, "I am because we are". I prefer the version, “I am, because of you”, meaning that I cannot be complete in isolation. I cannot be complete without you. We cannot be complete without the other.

Nelson Mandela expressed it this way, “The spirit of Ubuntu - that profound African sense that we are human only through the humanity of other human beings - is not a parochial phenomenon, but has added globally to our common search for a better world”

Barack Obama said it like this, “There is a word in South Africa - Ubuntu - that describes his greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us.”

An unknown source defined Ubuntu as “the belief that we are defined by our compassion and kindness towards others.”

“Desmond Tutu explains Ubuntu with these words: ‘One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.’”

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.

This is actually built into the formation of the United Church of Canada. The United Church does our best to embrace all people - regardless of your beliefs. Of course, we are a church, so we tend to only attract Christians. But within the UCC you should find a place to call home even if your faith and theology do not match everyone else. You do not have to agree with the minister. We welcome everyone. You are welcome here.

But that is not just about putting up with each other. The gift of the United Church is that people with different views of the Christian faith can come together. And not only co-exist, but also, to respect each other. To learn from each other. To deeply care for each other.

The “U” in United does not stand for “uniform”. We do not all have to be the same. We just have to open our hearts and lives to each other and to God. We are United. We are one.

I am, because of you. If you don't believe me, come and see.
Amen.