

Last June, at the 143<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly meeting in Kingston, the following motion was presented by the Committee on Church Doctrine, 'That The Presbyterian Church in Canada and its agencies, colleges, congregations, sessions, presbyteries, synods, committees and groups "seek the peace and unity of Christ among [our] people and throughout the Holy Catholic Church" under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as it discerns the mind of Christ in the matter of sexuality before the church.' A casual observer of the debate that ensued around the remaining motions of that report would quickly understand the rationale for such a plea. The Assembly was very, very divided and lengthy discussions, passionate pleas and intemperate language were commonplace.

For many in our church this will be a year in which the intent of that motion will prove challenging. In our 'sunny ways' society, one can easily and cynically shovel appeals for peace and unity into the bin designed for pious platitudes. If one takes faith seriously that option isn't available. Rather, one is faced with another more probing and substantive task – discovering what unites and conversely what divides, especially what forces bring harmony among God's faithful children and what tears them apart.

While by no means exhaustive, today's readings provide several answers. The story from Genesis demonstrates much that divides and the lesson from Romans sets out several factors that unite. First let's explore factors of division and then some antidotes.

The first dividing factor evident in the Genesis reading is fear. Fear, whether rational or neurotic, is sufficient by itself to keep people apart. Joseph's brothers have some solid grounds for apprehension. They are outsiders, foreigners. They have caused serious harm to Joseph. There is no legal protection available. Fear is a strong emotion and inevitably produces distrust and division.

In this case, guilt is an equal partner. As I just noted, the brothers had treated Joseph badly. What seemed like a good idea at the time has in the light of day proven to be very wrong and they have experienced great shame. Guilt builds walls; it doesn't open doors.

Privilege is on display here and it too inevitably keeps people apart. When I was first preparing this sermon, I was reading a novel situated in 18<sup>th</sup> century

Scotland. There was a wide gap between the lairds of the land and the crofters. Joseph has the Pharaoh's respect and trust; his brothers keep sheep, an occupation the Pharaoh disdains. The privilege Jacob, their Father afforded Joseph caused most of the initial rift between them. For privilege inevitably walks hand in hand with jealousy and a jealous person is an estranged person.

Closely related, are the glaring differences in daily life between Joseph and his brothers. He is consumed with the affairs of Pharaoh's court - managing the bureaucracy, governing the land. One slave fans his body, another keeps his glass refreshed. The brothers never see the inside of a building during the day. The wings of flies buzzing in the heat are the only fanning they experience. This kind of disparity in everyday life separates people.

And woven through this whole account and underlying all the various turns and events is the whole matter of power. Most of us are familiar with the saying that connects power and corruption. Granted, Joseph works hard in the story to use the power he has acquired to do good, but it looms in the brothers' minds as something that could in an instant destroy them. The inevitability of corruption aside, power imbalance is a force that promotes disunity.

Before looking at the New Testament lessons, let me make a comment. Throughout this year, but especially since mid-summer, there has been much talk about diversity and its inherent goodness. Biology would generally support those affirmations. However this rush to champion diversity, often neglects to take seriously a counter reality. A reality almost as basic to the human psyche, as the gag reflex is to the throat. The formal name for this reality is xenophobia, fear of the stranger or fear of the other.

One of the related falsehoods put out on social media is that we have to teach children to be frightened by someone who is different. That is false. Babies naturally are alarmed by something new, long before they develop a desire to explore something new. Just as we need to teach children to share or not hit, we have to teach children to embrace difference, they do not do that on their own. Division is more natural than unity, don't be misled by rhetoric. If unity were our default position, the Assembly wouldn't need to tell us to seek it!

Now back to the Scriptures. That lengthy parable in the gospel unpacks another major cause for division – greed. Another aside. The scriptures often equate greed with idolatry, so if you wonder at the harshness of the Master's judgement remember that. How else other than greed - a grasping heart, can you explain the first servant's divisive behaviour? How else could he have become so indebted, if he wasn't driven by an acquiring avarice?

Opposite to greed is contentment. The discontented will never be at peace, and if you are not peace within yourself, you are not going to be at peace with your sisters and brothers in the church.

The 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans highlights matters which have often been at the heart of division among God's people. I like to summarize Paul's advice as, 'Don't major on the minors'. Certain spiritual disciplines, particular religious rites and practices, specific ways of maximizing benefit to others can without a doubt be profitable and advantageous, perhaps for everyone. Nonetheless don't make what gives blessing to you a requirement for everyone. Here's an ironic example. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century we divided over introducing organs to replace the pitch pipe. 100 years later, some left when the organ wouldn't give way to guitars and drums.

We need to take care that what we insist on as essential to honouring God are the same things Jesus revealed, as he simultaneously practised the traditions of Moses and permitted those same traditions to be set aside. Once, 500 years ago, in the Reformation, division may actually have been rooted in something essential. Most other splits have been of a more cosmetic nature.

Obviously in a broken world, inhabited with fallen people there are many sources of division. Thankfully in God's kingdom there are many influences to establish unity. Here are some found in today's lessons.

In Genesis, Joseph offers a deep belief in God's sovereignty as a way to overcome forces that would divide. As noted earlier he had legitimate cause to be harsh with his older brothers. Yet during the repercussions of their abusive actions, he maintained trust in God's overarching power to do good. From such solid footing he was able to lay the groundwork needed to forgive them and to keep on seeking reconciliation.

Holding on to such faith in God could not have been easy while being paraded in the Egyptian slave market like livestock, nor sitting in prison on trumped up charges, nor abandoned by one you assisted, but Joseph did; and it controlled his approach to others, especially those in the wrong.

Our gospel lesson makes a compelling presentation of the power of mercy to override forces that would separate and divide. Combine this parable with Joseph's story and the strength of forgiveness to undo most things that would keep us apart shines through. It begins with the thankful joy of knowing you are forgiven and ends with the extension of open arms to the one who has offended. It is only the one who has perceived her own need for and who has received mercy, who in turn can offer a truly welcoming embrace to another.

The epistle sets forth three significant criteria for unity among God's people. *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval."*

*"Righteousness"*. There are two strands to this unifying criteria, right belief and right living. The latter requires the former and the former is ineffectual without the latter. Sadly some promote a unity that treats virtually all beliefs and all behaviours as equal, like Cole Porter's, 'Anything Goes'. Instead the Scriptures promote a unity that is built on a life that pleases God; one that puts humble service or love to God at the center and the well-being of others in the next concentric circle out.

Regrettably so often, both in society and in the church, we pursue justice and neglect the promotion of righteousness. In God's kingdom, when righteousness is lifted up, justice follows. When it is neglected, intolerance and division arise.

*"Peace and joy"*. Peace as demonstrated in our liturgy follows forgiveness. The one, who repents of his failure to be the person God created him to be, and who comes seeking the restoration and healing made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection, will experience both inner tranquility of heart and joyful gratitude for divine acceptance. That is true peace. Such a one alone can genuinely embrace another without reservation. Such a one alone can feel joy independent of the circumstances of the moment. Without such inward peace and joy, a person cannot be at one with another.

*"in the Holy Spirit"*. Since Adam and Eve's forced departure from Eden, enmity or division has been the default ethos for creation. One of the Spirit's main goals is to draw hearts back to God and to each other. This is done partly by increasing our understanding of who God is and who God calls us to be. It also happens as the Spirit deepens our sense of assurance that we have been made right with God through Jesus. The Spirit also provides strength that enables us to be righteous, to extend mercy and to confront dark forces of division. The Spirit enables us to discern and establish substantive bridges that can provide lasting unity.

In these critical times in the life of our church, may we find security in God's sovereignty, motivation in God's mercy, direction in God's will, contentment in God's acceptance and an energizing partner in God's Spirit. As we do, we will exhibit a passionate oneness that will flood our land with the good news of God's love.

Amen