

“Learning to Live with Our Differences”

Luke 14:1, 7-14

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Bill Bishop’s book, *The Big Sort*, published in 2008, documents the extent to which we in this nation have come to interact primarily with people who are just like us in terms of race, religion, ideology and socio-economic status. The author presents an abundance of data to support his claim, the claim squares with casual observation, and it seems like we have moved further down this path since 2008.

We live next to, go to church with and spend most of our time talking to people who look, think and see the world much as we do. And while this provides some measure of comfort in our everyday lives, it also isolates us from each other, it makes us think more people are just like us than are, and it creates room for dangerous and inaccurate caricatures of the other. Consider a few examples.

In Winston-Salem, where we lived for eleven years, most Caucasians live west of 52, most African-Americans live east of 52, most Latinos live in the southern part of the community, and the Asian-Americans apparently missed the memo and thus are all spread out as to where they live. There is tension over racial differences, people of different races view the same issues through different filters, and the fact that most people live and move in separate circles adds to the challenge.

In every church I have served, there are diverse tastes in music, even sacred music. And people who like the same kind of music seem to flock together - not by design, just organically. So, inevitably someone approaches me - the pastor, not the church musician - saying we should sing more of a certain kind of music because *everyone* loves that kind of music. But not everyone does. Everyone he/she knows may because we spend time with people who share our biases, but this does not help us relate to others who are different.

And then, there is the world of political ideation where we watch the shows which confirm our thinking, listen to the pundits who say

what we want to hear, and talk in depth with people who agree with us. How do we do this? How do we know? We ask teaser questions which give us a hint as to whether we want to talk more or not, and this does prevent some conflict, but it also isolates us from each other.

This has been going on to some extent since the beginning of this nation, indeed, the beginning of time. In the first human family there was such intense conflict that one son killed the other. Divisiveness is not a new phenomenon. But it has taken on a new level of intensity, so much so that it has crept into church life. And again, churches have always experienced conflict and division, but not quite like this.

Every church I know of has lost dozens of members at some point over the past decade or so because of some single issue – a theological issue, a political one, or some mundane matter. And the good news is there are enough churches in our culture for us to find a place where there are exclusively or at least mostly people just like us. But setting aside the damage this does to Christian witness, it adds to the destructive cultural pattern of separation and isolation. Birds of a feather are flocking together and then lining up against each other in American life.

The church is called not simply to reflect the worst of the culture around us, but to model something different, something better. But how do we do this? How do we swim upstream? How do we push back against the “big sort” when even church growth consultants tell us that the homogenous unit grows the fastest?

Perhaps we can learn something from Jesus in stories like the one we have read today from Luke. It’s not the central message of this story, though we will consider that, and it too will prove helpful. But one small detail we might easily overlook is significant. Again and again Jesus chooses to spend time with and stay in relationship with people who are different from him, even those who oppose his ministry.

In this story, he dines in the home of a leader of the Pharisees. We think of them as the enemy, but they are not a monolithic group and they are reformers of the law, like Jesus. Quite a few Pharisees oppose many of his teachings, but some are amazed at his acts of healing. Some even warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. Nicodemus, who comes to

Jesus in the night, asking for spiritual guidance, is a Pharisee. And, of course, Saul of Tarsus is a Pharisee before he is converted and becomes the first great missionary of the church.

Not all Pharisees are opposed to Jesus, nor do some who are remain opposed, but many are. Yet Jesus maintains relationships, even friendships, with them. According to John, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea take care of Jesus' body after he dies. Today's story is the third time in Luke when Jesus dines in the home of a Pharisee and table fellowship means even more in this time than it does in ours.

So, it seems clear that Jesus does not isolate himself away from all who differ with him, but rather chooses to remain in relationship with everyone, even his adversaries. This does not mean that he keeps his convictions to himself. On the contrary, he never holds back his opinions. In this case, he immediately starts telling people where to sit and where not to sit. And he tells the host whom he should invite to his parties, as in everyone; especially the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind – the who's who of the marginalized in this time.

One has to wonder what the host thinks at this point. Who does this guy think he is? Who invited him? But Jesus will not hold back. He will not swallow his opinions or shortchange his mission. Nor does he assume that the only way to maintain relationships is by avoiding subjects where there might be disagreement. He just remains with those with whom he differs and, in the process, offers us a model.

What difference might it make if we were willing to stay in relationship with those who are different from us? How might this help our witness? How might our capacity to model a different way benefit our culture? And in addition to all of this, how might we benefit from knowing a wide array of people?

One of the most rewarding experiences I had in Winston-Salem was a dinner group that included five members of Knollwood Baptist Church and five from Emmanuel Baptist Church. We met over dinner once a month for a year to get to know each other at a deeper level. It took a few meals to break the ice and develop the kind of trust where people were willing to be more vulnerable in sharing their stories across

racial lines. But we finally moved forward with the help of a book on multicultural relationships published by American Baptists.

One of the gifts of that book was the suggestion that groups like ours form a covenant to guide our relationships. We need boundaries to make us feel safe. One of the covenant principles was this – we have the most to learn and the most to gain by being in relationship with people who are different from us. Remembering this can keep us invested when challenges arise. It is a principle we adopted for that multicultural study. It is a principle we have used in interfaith relationships. And it is a principle that can help us as we develop relationships with people who are different in other ways. We have the most to learn and the most to gain by being in relationship with people who are different from us.

We are finding this to be true in our relationship with the other half of First Baptist Church. The book study we shared in late spring was enriching; we are considering dinner meetings like I experienced in Winston-Salem; and in February we are co-hosting a play on race, gender, and class called *Defamation*. We are also finding this to be true in our interfaith relationships. Building on past work with synagogues and mosques, we are co-hosting an event at a mosque on October 27 with Charles Kimball. Charles has written a new book on Christian-Muslim relationships and he will preach here that morning.

But there are many other ways we are called to reach out to those who are different in the world, even in our church. Often ideological differences are the most difficult to transcend, but it can be done. I think of the year civil rights activist Will Campbell spent drinking bourbon with Ku Klux Klan members (*Brother to a Dragonfly*, pp. 241-247). I had the privilege of knowing Will. He was a character and a passionate though unconventional justice advocate. So how did he spend this much time with Klansman? Did I mention that bourbon was involved?

It would have been for Will anyway, but he was convinced that there is humanity in all people, including Klansmen, and that we are called to love all people, even those who are the most different from us. Who could have been more different for Will Campbell than members of the Klan? So, he spent time with them and found human qualities he could affirm while never agreeing with their hateful teachings.

Who is the most different from us and thus perhaps the most difficult to love - in our society, in our workplaces and schools, in our church or family? Jesus stays with the Pharisees, dines in their homes, when they agree with him and when they do not, when they warn him of danger and when they threaten to kill him. We are called to stay with those who are different from us.

One thing that might help us is the central message of our story from Luke. It is a message about humility. Jesus tells people not to take the most important seats at a banquet, lest they be forced to move for someone more distinguished. Take the least important seats, he says, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Pride is a destructive force which threatens community. Humility is a virtue that brings us together.

How might this virtue aid our efforts to maintain relationships with those who are different? One of the greatest barriers to community is a kind of intellectual pride where we are so certain that we are right that there isn't any room for another view or the person who holds it. And there are issues on which there isn't much wiggle room. But we can feel too certain about too many things. Dorothy Sayers once said "the devilish strategy of Pride is that it attacks us, not in our weakest points, but in our strongest. It is preeminently the sin of the noble mind (as quoted in *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* by Henry Fairlie, p. 43)."

Indeed, this is how pride works, and when it includes too much certainty, there isn't room for different opinions. As William Sloane Coffin once said, we can build a community out of seekers of truth but not out of possessors of truth (as quoted in *Who Needs God* by Harold Kushner, p. 191).

Perhaps we might benefit from a strategy used by an Eastern Orthodox theologian. He would begin every lecture with a simple phrase: "about this I may be wrong." He would go on to present his position on any subject and the arguments which supported it. But he would do so with a measure of humility, ever saying "about this I may be wrong." It doesn't do away with conviction, but it does make room for disagreement. A little humility goes a long way.

How might such humility aid our efforts to stay with those who are different from us? We should have passionate views on some matters, but not on every matter, and even on those we do, can we find room to respect those who have equally passionate views opposed to ours? “All who exalt themselves will be humbled,” Jesus says, “and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” The truth is the whole community is exalted when humility shapes our shared life.

Years ago, in another setting, we had a Wednesday night series on Christian ethics, beginning with a framework for ethics and then proceeding to specific issues week by week. We used case study method, which provides emotional distance, and we agreed to stick to issues and ideas and avoid personal attacks. It went well, but near the end of the discussion time on one issue, a man, a dear friend to this day, crossed a line and expressed some anger not at me but at others in the conversation. The room felt suddenly tense, but before I could say anything, a retired biology professor calmly diffused the situation in a way that made even the man more comfortable, and we moved on.

The next week after dinner and before the study, he approached me at the coffee urn. “My wife says I made an a-double-s of myself last week,” he said. After a long pause, I finally said, “Are you waiting for me to confirm or deny?” “No,” he said, “I just have strong feelings about this issue, and I know you and I have different opinions, but that doesn’t make me care less about you as a person or as my pastor. I just don’t know that I’m going to change my mind.” I assured him that no one had to change his/her mind. That was not the goal of the study. It was about understanding our own views and what informs them as well as the view of others and what informs them. He was relieved, I was grateful, and the difference of opinion never hindered our relationship.

That’s what we are about in the church. That’s how we live with our differences. We have opinions and try to respect the opinions of others, and when we cross a line, we humbly acknowledge our wrongdoing and forgive each other. When we do, we present a witness to the world of what is possible and there is cause for rejoicing in the heart of God!