

# Covenant Word

## *Unity or Uniformity?*

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; I Corinthians 3:1-9; MT. 5:21-37

*A Message by  
The Reverend Sarah  
Jackson Shelton  
Pastor  
Sunday  
February 19, 2017*

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for wanting  
to read and study these  
thoughts more  
carefully. Please know  
that I do not take full  
credit for anything that  
may be contained  
within, because I may  
have read or heard  
something at some point  
during my pilgrimage  
and do not remember  
its source and thus,  
cannot give the rightful  
author his/her credit. I  
pray that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**

*Sarah Shelton*

Eenie, meenie, minee, moe.  
Catch a tiger by its toe.  
If he hollers, let him go.  
Eenie, meenie, minee, moe.

It's a children's game with which we are familiar. It is a way to make a choice when the picking appears to be difficult. If you are choosing between a chocolate sundae or a caramel sundae, nuts or no nuts, one scoop or two "eenie, meenie, minee, moe" might prove to be a good decision making solution. There is no way to lose really, because all of the options are good ones. But what if the choice has more at stake like choosing between jobs, between friends, between candidates, between one church family for another? Maybe the choices have to do with placing a feeding tube in a loved one or not; continuing the ventilator or not; treating the cancer with chemo-therapy or not; receiving radically invasive surgery or not. "Eenie, meenie, minee, moe," feels terribly inadequate at crossroads that carry larger consequences.

Maybe you are like Robert Frost, and because you took the road less traveled, your decision to do so has made all the difference, even encouraging you to take that less traveled road at other times. Or maybe you are still hanging in the balance at some crossroad, frozen by the enormity of a decision, fearful of the consequences no matter where you happen to land.

The church often finds itself on these precipitous corners. It has been a long time since preachers entered their pulpits afraid that what they will say will set off a long stream of emotional tirades. And yet, it is where we find ourselves now. It feels

punctuated with exclamation marks when we read the Old and New Testaments. They seem to force our hand for a decision—a choice—for uniformity or unity. I keep wondering how to encourage unity while maximizing our diversity. Isn't there a grace to that as well? Uniformity is not our goal: all looking alike, all thinking alike, all in agreement about every little and big thing. It seems to me that unity is our goal. We have much to be united about, and on this Sunday before Valentine's Day, don't you know that our unity is none other than the love of God who created us with enormous varieties of gifts. Paul says it elegantly. Some are to water and some are to plant working together in order that God can bring about the growth of God's Kingdom.

Just two weeks ago an associate priest, in our city, spoke of her convictions from the pulpit regarding recent Executive Orders. She went so far as to say that you cannot be a Christian if you support such edicts. So, as you can imagine, her congregation has been in an uproar ever since, holding special called town hall meetings in order for the push back to be heard, but also to work for reconciliation. At least, reconciliation has been my prayer for my peer in ministry and our sister church.

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Episcopal Bishop Kee Sloan wrote in his February 2 newsletter:

"I've been asked to address what's going on in our nation, and I suppose I should, even as I imagine that some of you will think I should stay out of this altogether and others will think I haven't gone far enough." He asks: "...can Christians address President Trump's recent action on immigration or other matters of politics with love and respect for people who think differently? Or is just not talking about it, while others rage and shout all around us, the best the Church can do? Should we protest, should we defend the President, should the Church be talking about this at



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***Paul says that we are God's field, and so we can expect to be cultivated. He says we are God's building, and so we can expect to be occupied. We are cultivated and occupied by a love that calls us beyond ourselves to the ministry of loving the world and all of its inhabitants. This is not negotiable. And when we think that it is, all we do is occupy a place on a pew while acting like everyone else who is not caught up in the love of God. We run the***

all? I think we should say what we want to say in love—if it has nothing to do with love, we should have nothing to do with it.

The Israelites knew what it was to make a life-giving choice of love. They leave Egypt and then wander in the wilderness for 40 years. As they wander, they murmur and grumble. They are joyful and rebellious. They are full of doubt at some points in their journey, and they are full of hope at others. At long last, they stand at the edge of the River Jordan. Moses addresses them. "We are finally going over into the Promised Land," he says. "It is what we have dreamed about all these years, but before we enter, you must make a decision. You must decide between life and death. Life comes from loving God, obeying God, cleaving to God so that your descendants may live. Otherwise, if you choose to love other gods, then you are choosing death." Eenie, meenie, minee, moe: to whom will you be faithful?

Moses calls the Israelites to make a choice for a relationship based on covenant not a relationship based on "things." Choose life by loving God and loving one another...not because we are given a computer or a car or medical benefits or whatever it is that makes us feel safe and happy. Moses knows better than that. Moses knows that love of God and love of neighbor are the source of personal well-being. (Walter Brueggemann, "Life Together...In the World," V12 of sermons)

Jesus also sums up the whole of the Law as love of God and love of our neighbor. And so in Matthew's gospel, when we find Jesus teaching, He reviews all that Torah requires about murder, adultery, divorce, false swearing, and retaliation. Incredibly, He doesn't ease up on the ancient requirements. No! Instead, He remarkably tightens them up with the repeated phrase, "But I say to you..." All of His teachings order life around relationships. The list ends with the hardest of them all, "Love your enemies," and "Be perfect." Have integrity. Be whole. Be in sync with God. To do so means swimming upstream against ordinary social practices. This positive regard for others is the sandpaper rub that is causing the unspoken and spoken dissonance in the greater culture and within our church culture even today. (Brueggemann)

The church at Corinth was experiencing similar events. The

congregation at Corinth is so divided that it is picking sides between its leadership, Paul and Apollos. They are picking the leader they like and trust the best. Paul, its founder, offers them advice in his letter. He tells them that quarreling over preferences is a mark of immaturity. He points out that everyone's work is essential, and so the choice is not about uniformity...everyone looking and believing and doing the same. The choice is about how unity might be experienced in diversity. Walter Brueggemann says:

[Paul's] appeal is not to compromise or pretend that we all like and trust one another, we liberals and conservatives. It is rather an insistence that church people act and live differently because we are not only bound to each other in faith. We are bound to Christ who is the full performance of God's deep love for the world. As 'coworkers' in the work of Christ, our task is to exhibit and enact God's deep love for the world, that is, to get our minds off ourselves and our biases and our particular passions enough to situate ourselves in the big picture of Christ's work in the world. ...Jesus goes beneath all of our ideologies, all party labels, all partisan ideologies.

Paul says that we are God's field, and so we can expect to be cultivated. He says we are God's building, and so we can expect to be occupied. We are cultivated and occupied by a love that calls us beyond ourselves to the ministry of loving the world and all of its inhabitants. This is not negotiable. And when we think that it is, all we do is occupy a place on a pew while acting like everyone else who is not caught up in the love of God. We run the risk of disgracing a high calling and turning it into eenie, meenie, minee, moe.

I think that Paul is brave here. He says to the Corinthians what every minister imagines saying to their congregations at one time or another over one issue or another but is rarely brave enough to do so. Paul says: "Grow up you babies! You are so immature that I can only give you milk to drink!" Paul is letting us know that God is passionately concerned with whether we grow up or shrink. We grow up by finding ways to creatively deal with conflict

here within these walls in the hopes that when we are outside, we will have tools to bring about effective change. We will never go about it in the same way but remember, uniformity is not what we are after. We just want to be unified in that the end result will provide growth towards God's Kingdom.

***The invitation of today's scripture is to be so involved in the emergence of humanness, human persons in all of their variety, human institutions in all of their effectiveness, human relationship in all of its mystery, that we don't have to get defensive. We can celebrate that in spite of our differences, we are***

Jesus is encouraging us to be in the world in a new way, to be present to the people and problems around us with freshness. (Walter Brueggemann, "A New

Way of Being in the World," A Way Other than Our Own) The usual way of being in the world is anxiety ridden. We are pressed and harried and worried, which too often leads to defensiveness and fear, a determination to keep what rightfully belongs to us: *to be babies*, living in reactive mode. Jesus, however, encourages us to be more. Instead of murder, go all the way back to correct behavior and regard towards another when you initially got angry. Instead of adultery, go all the way back to correct your intention to think of anyone as less than, as someone to be conquered and put on your trophy wall. Instead of swearing, go all the way back to correct your original obligation. Evaluate your answer of "yes," your answer of "no." How might our world change if we vowed to be less horrible to one another? Before making snap judgments or allowing cultural bias to dictate our behavior, what if we stopped and took some time to delight in our differences rather than immediately attack another for their beliefs, assume motivations, or dig trenches for the fortification of ideas. The invitation of today's scripture is to be so involved in the emergence of humanness, human persons in all of their variety, human institutions in all of their effectiveness, human relationship in all of its mystery, that we don't have to get defensive. We can celebrate that in spite of our differences, we are united in the love of Christ.

***Life or death; to plant or water; to love or not; unity or uniformity?***

Rick Bragg writes about his experience in the horrible tornadoes that swept through Alabama in 2011. I want to use his words about a specific tornado, but if you want to hear them figuratively about the storms raging in our country, that will work too. ("What Stands in a Storm," My Southern Journey) He says:

As Southerners, we know that a man with a chain saw is worth 10 with a clipboard, that there is no hurt in this world, even in the storm of the century, that cannot be comforted with a casserole, and that faith, in the hereafter or in neighbors who help you through the here and now, cannot be knocked down.

I know this to be true because I came home to it the day after the storm. My street, a quarter mile of small, historic homes and lovely trees had looked as though it were painted on canvas and hung on the air. It was ruined April 27. Just a few yards away, rescue workers pulled the dead from houses blasted as if in war. ...My wife cried when she saw it, and she cried more as she looked down our street. ...A few days after the storm, on a Sunday morning, I awoke to a tap-tap-tap on my roof. I should have gone to see what it was about...but I lingered in bed. ...Later, I learned that my neighbor James Mize had scaled the roof and tacked down some covering that had blown loose. He did not ask me where I went to church, or how I voted, or who my family was. He did not climb that ladder for money, or attention, or even thanks. He did it, he said, because it looked like rain.

Life or death; to plant or water; to love or not; unity or uniformity? Eenie, meenie, minee, moe.

A few Wednesday nights ago, Paul Richardson had us singing a hymn text by Benjamin Beddome. I close with his words: (First verse is omitted)

Among the saints on earth,  
let mutual love be found;

heirs of the same inheritance,  
with mutual blessings crowned.

Let bitterness and wrath  
be banished far away;  
Those should in strictest friendship dwell,  
who the same Lord obey.

Thus will the church below,  
resemble that above,  
where streams of endless pleasure flow,  
and every heart is love.

...and every heart is love, Amen.

Invitation to commitment:

Perhaps you have been trying to decide where you can best serve Jesus Christ. If you have been engaged in "eenie, meenie, minee, moe," it is time to stop. Simply walk down this aisle to receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior or to become a member of this congregation, as we stand to sing hymn # 694, "Great God of Every Blessing."