

Healing Divisions Readings: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23 Epiphany 3/A
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“Let there be no divisions among you, but be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” So writes Paul to the congregation in Corinth Greece almost 2000 years ago.

The history of the human race is marked by an abundance of divisions, quarrels, and differences. Unable to reconcile differing points of view and unwilling to compromise for the sake of peace, discord has hurt our relationships and has diminished the health of our families and nation. It seems as if we are hardwired to divide the world into *us* and *them* as part of our survival response. This unreflective response to stress perpetuates discrimination and division. That is why it is so critical at this time in history to rise above our physiological response to a higher level of consciousness where differences can be appreciated. We Christians call this higher level of thinking and acting “putting on the mind of Christ.” It is a state of mind where we begin to see the world as God sees it, getting our egos out of the way, and allowing the Holy Spirit to cast out all fear. Only then can we live into God’s dream, “that we all may be one.”

This past week, there was a big kerfuffle at the National Episcopal Cathedral in Washington D.C. The controversy centered around the cathedral’s decision to accept an invitation for one of its choirs to participate in the presidential inauguration and to host the Inaugural Prayer Service at the Cathedral. Being designated as the National Cathedral, these kinds of services have been held in the past for several of our country’s incoming presidents. This time however, there were many Episcopalians who thought that the Cathedral should not participate since its morals and ethics conflict with the incoming administration’s. Others believe that the National Cathedral is perfectly positioned to be a peacemaker, a bridge builder, and a reconciler, a model for others to see how we might come back together as a country.

How should a church community respond when charged with the task of holding a public service for a duly elected official who does not hold the same values of justice, peace, and the dignity of every human being? Should there be a complete separation between church and state? Do we pray for people because we like them or do we hold people in prayer as a way of surrounding them in reconciling love, praying that God’s grace will fill their hearts?

Differing ideas and perspectives have always been part and parcel of human communities, including the church. In the year 50 AD, St. Paul went on a mission to Greece, Macedonia, and what is now known as modern day Turkey. He started house churches, probably made up of 12-24 newly baptized Christians. Many of these folks had difficulty transitioning from their old ways of operating in the world to a way of relating based on humility and mutual respect. In today’s first reading from his letter to the church in Corinth Greece, Paul tries to address the divisions and quarrels that have erupted in this small community of faith. In this letter, we get a glimpse of the early Christians who have divided themselves among issues of worship practices, sexual ethics, social and economic class, spiritual gifts, theology, and educational level.

At first glance, Paul sounds like a babysitter trying to enforce peace among arguing siblings: “Can’t you just get along with each other?” Paul reminds them that their allegiance must not be to a particular leader or theological perspective. Instead, they belong to Christ. This means that in baptism, they have promised to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving their neighbor as themselves. With this understanding in mind, there can be no division. Or as J.K. Rowling once wrote: “We are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided.”

So how do we live together as a human community, respecting differing points of view? How do we stay connected to each other in the face of conflict? Scott Stoner offers us some building blocks that can help our personal relationships as well as our national health:

- “Listen. Listen. Listen. Few people make the mistake of listening too much, especially in the midst of conflict. Listen to the position of the other person until you understand it so well that you can articulate it just as clearly as your own. Somehow people have confused compassionate listening and understanding with agreeing. They are not the same. Mutual listening and understanding are foundational to conflict resolution, and remember that if through listening you find your position changing somewhat, this is not a sign of weakness.”
- “Understand the narrative that has given rise to the other person's position. All positions, all viewpoints, are embedded in a life narrative that has been formed and informed by important people, places, experiences, core values and beliefs unique to that person. Knowing all of this will help you understand the emotions that the person connects with their position. At the same time, be aware of your own narrative, your own life experiences that have formed and shaped your positions and viewpoints. When you encounter a person whose opinions are very different from your own, a couple of great questions to ask are, "How did you come to believe what you believe? Who were the important people and what were the important life experiences that formed the opinions you have today?"”
- “Remember that the problem or issue which is being debated is the problem, and don't make the person with whom you are disagreeing the problem.”
- “Avoid inflammatory language and always avoid demonizing the other person. Never resort to name calling or degrading language. Be respectful at all times.”
- “Practice humility. Articulate your perspective strongly, but know that in any complex matter, there are intelligent, ethical, well-meaning people who see things differently than you do.”
- “Affirm what unites you, rather than merely focusing on what divides you. There are often higher ideals that both sides agree on, even though they disagree on the best way to enact those ideals. If possible, look for genuine ways you can "meet in the middle" and when you cannot, then assert and act on your opinions and beliefs in a way that is respectful.”

In today's gospel story, we read that John the Baptist has been arrested. Eventually, John will be executed for publically challenging the king for his moral and ethical failings. But Jesus is not deterred by this unfortunate event. He has not lost hope nor does he allow fear to paralyze his public ministry. Instead, he keeps moving forward: Step by step, practicing his calling, going where he is sent, doing what he is giving to do, honing in on his central purpose which is determined by a force larger than the current conditions. He goes out and boldly shares his gifts of healing and preaching. He is not discouraged but rather empowered to keep the dream alive. What a wonderful example of moving forward in the face of tyranny.

No matter what how bad the situation in our country might be at this time, no matter what dire situations you see as monopolizing the world, no matter how much division is in your family, your work place, or your community, there is a greater truth. And that truth is that “the Light has come into the world and the darkness has not overcome it.” So announce this truth, live it each day, prove it by your actions and generosity, invite others to live the dream with you, and never give up. For with God all things are possible and this is where we place our hope.