

1-18-26 Integration: Who is Around Me?

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1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4: 12-23

Paul writes in our 1 Corinthians text today, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no division among you..."

**deep breath

Now...using our same polling responses that we used earlier (snap/clap/sigh), Are we all of one mind? Oh, and one more question...How is that working for us? It's complicated right?!

We are united on this, divided on that, but most of it is complicated....

I called a clergy friend this week and shared the scripture for today from 1st Corinthians: Where Paul is making this appeal to be in agreement and of one mind. Her response was, "ahh... I used to like that text." I think she is speaking to how far off that dream is for us; because this idea (though not exactly realistic) is quite a sweet one.

Today we have two scriptures about people and relationships as we discuss the theme of Integration: asking the very important question: Who is around us? I want to share a poem with you that kept coming to my mind in light of these scripture readings. It is written by Wislawa Szymborska, a celebrated Polish poet titled "A Word on Statistics." A poem that speaks to human behavior and our various motivations for responding or not responding in various circumstances.

"A Word on Statistics" by Wislawa Szymborska

Out of every hundred people

those who always know better:
fifty-two.

Unsure of every step:
nearly all the rest.

Ready to help,
as long as it doesn't take long:
forty-nine.

Always good,
because they cannot be otherwise:
four—well, maybe five.

Able to admire without envy:
eighteen.

Led to error
by youth (which passes):
sixty, plus or minus.

Those not to be messed with:
forty and four.

Living in constant fear
of someone or something:
seventy-seven.

Capable of happiness:
twenty-some-odd at most.

Harmless alone,
turning savage in crowds:
more than half, for sure.

Cruel
when forced by circumstances:
it's better not to know
not even approximately.

Wise in hindsight:
not many more
than wise in foresight.

Getting nothing out of life but things:
thirty
(although I would like to be wrong).

Doubled over in pain,
without a flashlight in the dark:
eighty-three,
sooner or later.

Those who are just:
quite a few at thirty-five.

But if it takes effort to understand:
three.

Worthy of empathy:
ninety-nine.

Mortal:
one hundred out of one hundred—
a figure that has never varied yet.

If the statistics referenced in this poem tell us anything, it is not who is right or wrong, but how uncertainty fractures us into many ways of being. Each response serves an attempt at steadiness in an unsteady world.

As readers, we are not really clear about where she pulls these numbers from and how many individuals at any given time she is polling... but we find ourselves all throughout the poem on one side of the statistic or another. Agreeing with her interpretations or heartbroken by them. A part of the majority one instant and in the minority the next. I know I don't hear this poem without placing myself in the narrative.

To me this demonstrates that disagreement is not a failure of community so much as a symptom of shared uncertainty. Differing perspectives among people is a reality.

In 1 Corinthians Paul is making an appeal to the church in Corinth, a place where allegiance, certainty, and belonging had begun to matter more than the work of holding

one another together. And though many of us gather in this space today to be among like minded individuals we still carry great differences into this space. In our own ways we can all be limited by our lack of knowledge, our lack of perspectives and our lack of relationships with people whose thoughts differ from ours. I for one am grateful that we are not all of one mind.

Have you noticed that the communities trying desperately to be in absolute alignment are the ones that don't endure... or if they do endure.. they are often some of our greatest sources of trauma... This drive for no divisions is pursued in more places than we might care to think. For example, my clergy friend living in the south shared with me this week that the many churches who sought disaffiliation from the UMC less than a year ago find themselves in a second round of disaffiliations in their pursuit of perfect alignment in thought and practice. Splitting the split in search of absolute agreement. It's not hard for us to imagine how painful this must be. Searching for perfect unity among humanity is just not something that exists.

But we don't just see this pressure to conform in our churches. We see this in friend groups where we agree on most everything but how to parent our children, in ecosystems when they become so homogenous that they can't thrive or survive. We see it in organizations where there is no room for dissent, and in families where disagreement is treated as betrayal.

We can surely try to cultivate communities and relationships with individuals in which there is absolute alignment but something will always be missing. Because the strongest of communities:

- Allow disagreement
- Engage in honest dissent
- Survive criticism

Those that demand sameness will crumble when reality intrudes.

We have proven many times just how easy it is to categorize each other in groups and make judgments about another's worthiness, their value, or belonging. We have been conditioned to do this for years and we are most certainly not the first to behave in this manner. Making assertions as to Who belongs where? Who is in or out? And who is right or wrong?

At the time of Paul's writing, the Church in Corinth finds itself in this same place. There is disagreement among them. They are fighting over baptismal water really which seems so small, but it too, is a fight over identity and belonging as they make

statements regarding whose baptism was more valued. Saying, “Well, I’m sure glad I was not baptized by the same person who baptized you.” Bickering and quarreling over to whom they belong. And calling the question as to who among them carries the most wisdom, status or power?

We pointed to water in this space just last week as a unifying factor for us in our identity as beloved children of God. We claimed it as a launch pad from which we will all be called in various directions by God to work, live and move out in the world. Naming that we all will be called to follow Christ in the world and we can do so in our own ways and styles while also claiming common ground.

There is a quote attributed to John Wesley about finding the essentials.

“In essentials unity; in nonessentials liberty; in all things charity.”

When people agree on what is truly essential, they avoid fragmentation over minor issues and stay aligned around a shared foundation. Charity here means love, humility, patience, and generosity toward others. Even when disagreements arise, treating people with respect ensures that relationships are preserved. Charity keeps unity from becoming rigid and closed to others. But instead works to create space for all. We will not align on every single topic .. yet here we are... practicing these virtues with each other and in the world again and again and again.

In one of his sermons Wesley writes:

“Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion?... If thine heart is as my heart, if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more: give me thine hand.”

This image of a hand extended to all is not unlike the visual on our worship series slides. After all, our collective call has much to do with extending our hand to our neighbors as it is an invitation to pursue love and justice in a world filled with much tension.

And... just in case we needed another, we have yet another example of an extended hand in that of Jesus’ calling of the disciples. In the hearing of the reading from Matthew we find ourselves in Galilee, this is by no means the religious center of the region but a place where different people met and gathered. A place of diversity and displacement. So not unlike the St. Cloud Region is made up of all kinds of people seeking community, work and livelihood.

A community not of one mind but of many. People sharing in the struggles and hopes of the time. People holding lots of wealth and power and others trying hard to get by. Some benefiting from the systems and others repeatedly harmed by it. And Jesus shows up, extends his hand and invites the disciples to follow.

I imagine this could have gone several ways. The text reads they dropped their nets and followed him. I imagine, similar to you or I, they each responded from their circumstances. I bet some did drop their nets and immediately followed. After all, Jesus was speaking words of love, hope and justice, a message they longed to hear, a message that resonated and was yearned for in this very unsettling time.

Some of these fishermen were so low in social status that there was little to let go of...no place to go but up, and I imagine for them the decision to follow was more simple. Others probably paused, feeling fear of change, assessing the risks, anxious by the unknown, but at some point, at some time, saw something in this movement that looked like hope. So they too followed.

Jesus' ministry, I will remind you was one of liberation. Not for a select group of people but for all people. Jesus took inventory of those around him and saw value in difference. He was not naive to the fact that his followers were not a group of likeminded individuals. He was not naive to the fact that they would endure ridicule and challenge, but the Jesus movement was strong and effective in its diversity. A movement in which all were elevated. A group knit together by all types of people, by all thoughts and perspectives that shaped and reflected and benefited the whole. May we seek to see and understand transformation in the way Jesus was pursuing it. Creating a sense of welcome for all and not some. Creating safe spaces to practice faith and vulnerability.

Paul proposes that we be knit together. And I think Wesley prompts us (not unlike Jesus) to seek community in the essentials. Christians don't always agree on policies, but we are called to love, protect dignity, and walk with those who are afraid. True liberation is not an isolated journey; it happens when we become a people knit together in purpose, concern, and welcome, especially for those at the margins and those who are missing from our circles.

So in a world and not just a world this week but in our very own community. Where in our headlines and on our streets power and force seem to dominate. Jesus points to a different center. Not one of might or fear but solidarity with one another.

How do we as a community faith take our hold in "the essentials." What if today we are

not called to give something up or walk away from anything. But respond to the hand that has always been extended to us with the invitation to move towards grace, to pivot towards peace in and for a world that is immensely hurting right now.

To follow Jesus in pursuit of God's justice and mercy for all, not not just some. Where power and privilege are flipped on their heads and we seek the liberation of people as priority.

In the same way Jesus invites us like he invited Simon, Andrew, James and John into a different life, a better way of being in and of community. Where those worthy of empathy are more than 99. Where those desiring inclusion receive it at a rate of ten out of ten. And where all are compelled to lead by Love.