

Original Diversity

The Second in a Series of Six Sermons on Progressive Christianity

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“Jesus summoned his twelve disciples. . . .” – Matthew 10:1

One of my professors in divinity school used to advise us, “Never overlook the obvious,” so at the risk of stating the obvious, let me say to you this morning, in this second sermon on progressive Christianity, what I’ve said to you before in other contexts: Jesus had twelve apostles, not one.

That’s what our text from Matthew tells us, and you can find similar texts in Mark and Luke and Acts. You won’t find the same list in John and that’s okay, because John, as we learned in our Bible study that just wrapped up, pretty much always goes his own way.

And that’s another of those obvious facts about Christianity that should not be overlooked: we have four gospels, not one, and they don’t all say the same thing and we shouldn’t try to make them. If you lay them down side by side and compare them, you’ll see a great deal of common material in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Not so much in John until we get to the passion, which is the part of Jesus’ story between his arrest and his resurrection. Then John really goes to town and tells us much of what the other evangelists tell us and quite a bit besides. Jesus’ exchange with Pilate, for example, which we examined in some detail this past Thursday, is much more extensive and complicated than it is in the other gospels, and we asked ourselves why that might be. We asked what point John might be trying to get across to us in Pilate’s famous and terse question, “What is truth?” That question was put to Jesus but it’s also put to us, and sooner or later we all had better come up with some kind of answer for it.

That’s one of the things that makes the Bible the Bible, the Scripture of the Christian church. It’s questions are almost never simply historical. They’re really trans-historical, that is, they start at one point in history but they don’t stop there. They travel through the centuries and across cultures, and they leap off the page to confront anyone who picks up the book.

If you lived in the first century and if you wanted to have some kind of meaningful life, you’d have to answer Pilate’s question, just as you would if you lived in the thirteenth century, or now with us in the twenty-first century. Pilate’s question travels, and it travels well because human beings long ago saw the value of distinguishing truth from everything else.

Jesus asked another famous question, this one, originally, to his disciples: “Who do you say that I am?” You can find that question in Matthew and Mark and Luke, but not in John. But it’s certainly an important question, especially for those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus. Who do we say that Jesus is? The Messiah? The Christ? The Son of God? The Savior of the world? All good enough answers for the church to pat us on the head and tell us that we’ve

learned our catechism, but do any of those answers help us live out what might even remotely resemble the kind of life that Jesus said we were supposed to live – a salty life, a leavening life, a life that gives light to the world?

Those of you who stuck with the four weeks of the study of John's gospel might have perked up when you heard the words "I am" come from Jesus. We know how significant those words are in the Gospel of John – Jesus says them about two dozen times – and if we're trying to wring a unified message from the gospels, we've got to wonder why Matthew, Mark, and Luke didn't consider those "I am" statements as important as John did. Biblical scholars do wonder about such things, and it's good that somebody does, and let's hope and pray that all of the religious studies departments in our universities don't collapse because all the funding is now going to science, math, and technology.

Twelve apostles, four gospels, two testaments, ten commandments, twelve tribes, thirty-nine books in the Old Testament, twenty-seven books in the New. And that's the shorter canon recognized by Protestants. The older branches of Christianity have always had a larger Bible.

Diversity is everywhere in Christianity, and it probably started with those twelve apostles, who all heard the good news from Jesus and of Jesus in a different way and established a diverse church from the very beginning. There never was just "a" Christian church; there were only churches, and those churches were not the same. The church at Antioch was very different from the church at Philippi, which was different from the church at Ephesus, which was different from the church at Rome. Their faith in Christ made them Christian, but the way they chose to live out that faith made them unique.

If the internet is to be believed, for some of our more conservative siblings, diversity is one of those secret code words that we liberals use to water down the faith. But the faith doesn't say anything about, for example, transgendered people, at least not the faith that can be traced back to Scripture, and so we're not watering anything down, we're making something up. We're building an addition onto the household of faith so that there's room for everybody. Sure, there were just Jews in the original Christian church – Jesus told his apostles not to go anywhere among the Gentiles in today's reading – and most of them were men. But pretty soon the family started to expand – Scripture tells us of the Gentiles wanting to join – and Paul believed that he'd been called to welcome non-Jews into the Jesus movement without making them convert to Judaism, and Peter and others in the Jerusalem church originally resisted that idea. And you can see their point. Who's a Jewish Messiah for except for Jews? And that difference of opinion led to one of the first of many family squabbles.

And that's what happens when things become diverse. People start to feel threatened – that something important is being taken away from them or that their group will lose its way in the welter of opinions.

But Scripture tells us that there's no getting away from diversity unless we try to suppress it. And that's what we did. Within a few decades of Jesus' resurrection we had a lot of Christian communities all over the world, all following Jesus in their own way, and some people started shouting like a judge, "Order! Order!" and so we tried to bring order to the movement. Peter, never at a loss for words or actions, emerged very early as one of the most prominent of the twelve, and Jesus said that he would build his church on the rock of Peter, which was a play on Peter's Greek name, *petros*, which had never been a Greek name until

Jesus gave it to Peter.

And Jesus was probably messing with Peter, since Peter turned out to be made of pretty soft rock, denying Jesus three times and running away with the other ten when the cops showed up. And after Jesus was raised from death, he asked Peter if he loved him in that personally disinterested kind of way that the Greek verb *agapein* means, and Peter kept answering Jesus' question with a different Greek verb for love, *philein*, which means we're best buds. Peter still didn't get it, at least not initially. Finally, Jesus gave up and used Peter's verb when he asked him a third time if he loved him, and Jesus left it up to Peter to figure out how to be best buds with a resurrected and ascended savior.

And that's the way Scripture tells the story – people talking past each other, folks getting it one minute and not getting it the next, heroism in this situation, cowardice in that one. The story is varied and rich and diverse because the people whose story it is were varied and rich and diverse. Diversity, diversity, diversity – it's there at the beginning.

There is unity in the Bible's story, to be sure, but the unity is much more in God's love for us, and much less in our response to God. We respond to God in different ways because we have no choice. I can't respond to God as Martha does and Frank can't respond to God as Leslie does. There's some overlap in our responses, of course, which is what makes a church or a religion or a country club possible, and there's more overlap than we commonly give ourselves credit for.

But one of the marks of progressive Christianity is that we don't try to impose uniformity on the way we believe or the way we live out our belief. We accept diversity as the way God puts together creation, trusting in the Holy Spirit to help us recognize and respond to the power of the gospel in faithful ways.

Now of course we all know that one person's faithfulness is another person's heresy, and there is no bright line to distinguish the one from the other. The first Christians were, in the eyes of their Jewish contemporaries, heretical Jews because they saw in Jesus the incarnation of their long-awaited Messiah. Most Jews had a very different expectation of who their Messiah would be and what he would do. Moreover, Jesus' teachings didn't square with what most Jews expected their Messiah to preach – loving one's enemy, for instance, was very different from loving one's neighbor – and so the majority of Jewish people rejected the claims of Jesus' followers to have insight into their Jewish faith that other Jews lacked. You and I both know how irritating it is when someone like that knocks on your front door. So when the first Christians, as they eventually came to be called, insisted on trying to convert their fellow Jews to their way of understanding Jesus, the Jewish authorities quite naturally took action and said, in effect, "You all need to leave." We studied that historical moment in the John study.

And moments like that continue to this day. There's always tension in a group's boundaries, and what distinguishes progressive from less-progressive Christianity is the degree of flexibility in those boundaries. Progressive Christianity is much more flexible in accepting people into its fellowship than less progressive versions of Christianity are, and it's been that way for a very long time.

In 1657, the thirty-eight (?) Congregational churches of Massachusetts Bay Colony got together to thrash out an important question of church membership. The founders of those churches, thirty and forty years earlier, had said that the mark of a true Christian and therefore a true church member, was having had an experience of what they called "saving grace," that

is, a dramatic sense of conversion. The only people who could be church members were those who could testify to having had such a dramatic spiritual experience. Today, the language we would likely use to describe that experience is being “born again,” a phrase taken from the Gospel of John.

By the time the second and third generations of New Englanders were being born, and the second and third waves of immigrants were arriving on the rocky shores, the number of people who could testify to an experience of saving grace was dropping precipitously, and church membership was in serious decline. Not only that, but the children of people who had themselves been baptized but had not had an experience of saving grace could not be baptized because their parents weren’t members of the church. And in many minds at the time, baptism was essential for salvation. That logic, therefore, drove many parents to the awful fear that their unbaptized children might die and go to hell.

And so a half-way covenant was drawn up whereby those persons who agreed to the covenant and agreed to live by the creed could be considered members of the church and have their children baptized, but they could not receive communion or vote in church or civic affairs. This was considered by the progressives of their day to be a reasonable compromise with the out-of-date standards of an earlier generation. And this practice prevailed in most of the churches of New England for the next century, until Jonathan Edwards and other revivalists of the First Great Awakening insisted that church membership was open only to convinced believers.

Let’s take another example, also involving children and also involving communion, and much closer to home than frosty New England.

Some years ago, the question arose here at Faith whether baptized children should receive communion before they were confirmed. We began to chew on that bone after we read in the document from the World Council of Churches called *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* that there is one and only one door into the Christian church and that is baptism. We all agreed with that. A baptized Christian of whatever age and mental or physical capability is a church member and is entitled to receive all the sacraments of the church. This applies equally to those who are too young to reason about communion as well as to those who have lost their ability to reason about communion. None of us who engaged in that discussion gave any serious consideration to withholding communion from someone suffering from dementia, for example, because they couldn’t think about what they were doing. We had an enlarged understanding of what Paul meant when he warned against receiving the sacrament unworthily.

At the same time, we also recognized that some parents felt that they wanted their children to have a fuller experience of communion by having a greater understanding of what they were doing, and so, if they preferred to have their children wait until after confirmation before they received communion, we were perfectly willing as a church to respect and honor that position. Leaving the matter to the judgment of parents as to what was best for their children seemed to us the best way to handle the matter because our focus was on the well-being of our congregation rather than on adhering to what had been the policy of an earlier generation. Enlarged thinking resulted in an enlarged practice, or, if you prefer to use the traditional language of the Reformed tradition, we were in the process of continuing the reformation of the church – *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est* – the reformed church is

always being reformed.

Of course, not everyone would agree with our decision – our Baptist and Anabaptist siblings, such as the Amish and Mennonites would certainly disagree with us – and others in the Christian family would say that we weren't continuing to reform ourselves as much as we were wandering off the path of historic Christianity. But it was our decision to make, and we made it, as faithfully as we could.

Let me close now by lifting up what I consider one of the best statements about our appreciation of diversity that I've yet encountered in the United Church of Christ, or in any church, for that matter.

As most of you know, we've had a membership class underway for a few weeks, and on Aug. 6th we will formally receive four folks into membership who have been part of our worshiping community for months or even years.

As part of that liturgy, it is my privilege to address the new members with these words: "By your baptism, you were made one with us in the body of Christ, the church. We give thanks for every community of faith that has been your spiritual home, and we celebrate your presence in this household of faith."

To give thanks for all the ways of being Christian that don't necessarily agree with us and with whom we do not, on every point, agree, is a mark of progressive Christianity. When I say the words "We give thanks for every community of faith that has been your spiritual home," I will mean them, and I hope you will be in agreement with me. I will be giving thanks for the high regard for Scripture of the Baptists. I will be giving thanks for the heart-warming spirituality of the Methodists. I will be giving thanks for the rich and nuanced social teaching of the Catholics. I will be giving thanks for the passion for the good news of the evangelical Independents. And so many others.

If you're not afraid of diversity, there are so many reasons to give thanks for the many ways of being faithful. And when you're not afraid, the world becomes a far less frightening place.