

Easter 7, Year C
Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh
2nd June, 2019
Revelation 22:12-14
John 17:20-26

Unified Love

Why can't we all just get along?

That's a cliché I'm sure we've all heard at one time or another. But it is a valid question.

Why can't we all just get along?

What is it that drives us apart, that causes us to be unable, or unwilling,
to live in harmony with each other?

Certainly we have our differences with other people,
things that make us unique as individuals.

We all have our own life journeys that are specific to each of us,
that give us our own perspectives and points of view.

Our background is full of factors that influence the person we become:

our family situation, our cultural background,
our gender and sexual identity,
as well as the many relationships and interactions with other people
all have an effect on who we become, and the outlook we have.

If we accept that our own perspective is uniquely our own,

then it only makes sense that those around us
each have their own unique perspective as well.

But even accepting that reality, we still sometimes find ourselves at odds
with another's point of view.

What is it that makes us draw a “line in the sand”

that makes another's outlook unacceptable to us?

What is it that drives us away from some people and leads us to exclude them?

In his book,

The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion,

New York University professor Jonathan Haidt,

writes about how our brains are built to conclude

that “half the people in this country live in a different moral universe.”

Haidt argues that the building blocks of society rely on morality

(a belief in what is right and what is wrong).

A shared morality helps humans to bind together into cohesive social groups,

and that allows us to live more productively and effectively.

Inherent in this socialization process, however,

is the division of individuals into groups

to which we either belong or do not belong.

Those who belong become our comrades; those who do not, our adversaries.

As social creations, we're hard-wired in a certain sense

to associate with those who share our sense of morality,

and avoid those whose moral compass differs from our own.

So we have this inclination to favor some over others.

In Haidt's book, he describes how our gut feelings about ideas

inherent to our own group practices tend to be positive.

Moreover, our feelings are powerful, primary, and difficult to change.

Because of the primary and leading nature of gut intuitions of "right" and "wrong,"

our reasoning and thinking mind takes on the job
of rationalizing our intuitions after the fact.

In other words, the feelings come first, and the reasoning comes second.

Further magnifying the power of our gut feelings

is a process known as confirmation bias.

In this process, the human brain automatically and skillfully works

to confirm that which we already believe

by poking holes in the logic of that which we do not believe.

Yet we lack a natural ease in questioning our own ideas

or opening our minds up to those that do not mesh

with our already-held beliefs,

with some being more hard-headed than others.

That means it can be excruciatingly hard to change your own mind—

or to change somebody else's.

But the question is, do we have to be of the same mind to get along?

Or is the act of finding ways to get along with others who think differently the bigger priority?

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus is concerned indirectly with just that.

This is the end of his final discourse to his disciples,

and he is trying to impress upon them the importance of not only their unity,

but the unity of this new movement going forward.

He stresses that unity, this idea of getting along with each other,

is something that is divine, of God.

He points out in his final prayer, "Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,

so they might be one heart and mind with us.

Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.

The same glory you gave me, I gave them,

so they'll be as unified and together as we are—I in them and you in me.”

There is a sense that being able to get along is more important

than whatever differences there may be between them.

And differences there were.

It's clear from the rest of scripture that they certainly did not agree on all topics.

Paul, and to a lesser extent Peter,

embraced bringing uncircumcised Gentiles into the fold,

while James and others were initially stringently against that.

The Jerusalem church clung to the Jewish dietary restrictions

while Paul helped the Gentiles in the Roman world

justify eating meat that was sacrificed to idols.

It's clear that even at the very beginning,

there were divides in thinking among the earliest believers

about what was the correct moral path to take.

But they found a way to continue forward together.

Fundamental to their walk together was forbearance.

Forbearance is defined as showing restraint and tolerance.

It's the ability to recognize that we don't always agree

with our sisters and brothers,

but that we can continue walking together with them,

and tolerate those issues

which we may have differing opinions of.

The author I mentioned earlier, Jonathan Haidt addresses this as well
in his observations.

He points out that once we understand the ways in which our brains are wired,
we can begin to approach our in- and out-groups a bit differently;
we can even absorb news and engage in conversations
with comrades and adversaries in new ways.

But even better, is to actually engage in real conversation,
where you actually listen to each other.

But to actually listen means to allow the other person
to express their point of view,
without sitting there formulating your response.

It means having an open and clear mind,
and really making an effort
to understand the other person's point of view.

It means making that effort a priority,
not just being rigid in your own point of view.

As followers of Christ, we're called to a higher expectation than the world around us.

Jesus is telling his followers that our strongest witness to the world around us
is how we interact with each other.

It's not the us versus them that has always ruled the world.

It's not in versus out,

playing the blame game and picking scapegoats
to pin all our problems on.

It's to be a community based on love, not distrust and hate.

Jesus stresses that our witness to the world should be evidence

“that God sent him and loved us in the same way God loved Jesus...
so that God's love for Christ might be in us.”

But that doesn't imply that we don't have moral compasses to guide our actions,
that we can count on no hard and fast rules to guide how we live our lives.
But again, our path is different from the way the world often works.
Ours is a path guided by love.

Is our gut instinct based on love, or something else?

If it's not love, it is not of God.

1 John makes clear that God is love, and if love does not guide us,
we are not of God.

We live in a world that drifts further and further from using love as it's moral guide,
as forbearance becomes an idea that seems to be part of our past.

Instead of “we,” there seems to be only “us and them,”
with more and more people becoming “them.”

Which is all the more reason our witness needs to be how we treat each other,
and particularly those who differ from us.

Followers of the Christ of the Gospels

do not belittle each other for how they interpret scripture
and apply it to their lives.

Those who follow Jesus do not label foreigners as “bad hombres”
simply because of where they come from or the color of their skin,
and they don't support putting children in cages.

When we choose our positions on moral issues, love is our guidepost.

If we aren't showing love,

then we do not show anything different than the world has to offer.

A prominent public minister has called for this to be a day of prayer

to support our country's president.

While I cannot, as a follower of Christ, pray to support the actions of someone

who does not promote values that lift up love and compassion

over distrust and hate,

I can pray for a change of heart in that leader.

I can pray for the people of our country and the world

to seek more love and compassion for their neighbor,

and less distrust and stereotyping and scapegoating.

I can pray that we learn to talk and listen, really listen to those we disagree with.

And most importantly, I pray that we, as God's people,

can live public lives of love, in all that we say and all that we do,

so that there is no doubt that we are something different

than the bitterness, hate, and distrust

that emanates not only from the world in general,

but the very halls of power that govern us.

Can you share in that prayer?

I fervently hope that we all can seek to live lives of love and compassion together,

forbearing our differences and seeking to truly listen and understand each other,

as a true community based on love and understanding.

If we can do that, we just might be something the world finds value in again.

May it be so. Amen.