

One Church, One Community, One Humanity

Ephesians 2:17-22

January 15, 2017

There seems to be a universal longing when it comes to human beings. It is a longing to fit in, to belong. Yet there seem to be so many obstacles standing in the way. Over time my desire to know more about the reasons behind these obstacles has grown tremendously. This need led me to the work of Father Richard Rohr and for those of you who may not know that name, he is an ordained Catholic Priest and author of numerous books.

Of all the theologians and religious teachers I have studied over the past few years, I have found most compelling Father Rohr's perspective and work on the Trinity and the destructive effect Dualism. This idea of Dualism is relatively new to me, but it has helped me understanding a lot about our culture because Dualism reduces everything to 2 possibilities. Such an approach has us asking questions like, "What's in it for me?" or "How will I look if I do this?"

If we allow it, this two option approach becomes our preferred way of seeing reality. Ironically, this is even the case for those who think of themselves as Christians, and for good reason. The language of institutional religion is largely dualistic itself and this way of teaching has totally taken over in the last five hundred years. It has confused information with enlightenment, mind with soul, and thinking with experiencing.

This type of either/or thinking cripples us and has us believing the only way to gain understanding is by comparison, opposition, or differentiation. This thinking only gives us two options, such as good/evil, pretty/ugly, in/out, good/bad, right/wrong, intelligent/stupid, without even realizing there may be 55 or 155 degrees between those two ends of each spectrum. It works well for the sake of simplification and conversation, but not for the sake of truth or even honest experience.

The thing is, our world seems to encourage us to think this way and oftentimes in our jobs, like teacher, doctor or engineer, we are rewarded for doing so. Having two options can be great if the underlying issue itself is wholly within our understanding of the way the world works. The problem comes when we find ourselves approaching things like infinity, mystery,

God, grace, suffering, death, or love in the same way, because a mind reduced to two options cannot process these things. There is simply no room for things like unconditional love because this mindset pulls everything down into a this for that system of worthiness and achievement.

At its worst, two-way thinking leads to a life of competition with everyone holding a different point of view. People with differing perspectives become your opposition, never your ally. This approach then feeds our ego's preference of making one side better than the other. The end result: we choose sides and then argue with the greatest passion we can muster to prove that the side we chose is right.

Luckily, or maybe unluckily, this approach to life is not unique to us as it has been happening since the beginning of time. Throughout history we find people claiming things like, males are better than females, America is better than _____, or one political party is better than the other. Sadly, for most people, once this decision is made everything is understood in opposition to something else, leaving them almost blind to any other possibility. This, for me, seems to explain a lot about why people act the way they do.

Then someone like Jesus comes along and lives a life so counter-cultural, so revolutionary, that some who were blind, can now see and once they see, they are transformed in ways that move them away from this limited view of the world. This is why Jesus emphasizes mercy, and forgiveness, and grace. You see, once truly experienced, these are the things that totally break dualism down. Ask anyone who has experienced being loved when feeling unworthy, being forgiven when wrong, and I believe they will tell you about a third way. They will tell you about relationships based on grace, not a quid pro quo system.

This is where the counting stops.
This is where the comparisons end.

This is where you stop trying to decide who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, who is good and who is bad. The great saints throughout history have shown us as much because this is where their spiritual life of falling deeper and deeper into that water of grace takes over and they see no need to continue asking "how much has been given to me," or "how much do I deserve."

Unfortunately for our beloved country, this either/or, right/wrong thinking has brought us to a real low-point. The current state of affairs could easily cause a neutral observer to say, “everything appears to be based entirely on who is deserving and who is entitled.” This attitude of entitlement has become the dominant attitude throughout and it appears most may not even realize that being trapped inside of that mind leads to the kind of angry country we have today. A country where you’re just looking for the person to blame or the person to hate. Did any of us ever imagine this is where we would be?

This brings me to our scripture today. While some scholars today get lost in a debate over the author’s identity, to do so, in my opinion, results in a loss of the overall message of the ONENESS OF HUMANITY, you know the Good News of the Gospel. In fact, this overall message of humanity’s ONENESS with God is central to every one of Paul’s Letters, and it is clearly found in the book of Ephesians.

In a world so dominated by a Tribal mentality, you know, my tribe and your tribe kind of thinking, embracing this idea of ONENESS is almost impossible. And yet if we truly claim to be Christians, meaning followers of Jesus’ and his teachings we cannot get around this fact: Jesus, as did Paul, taught we are all part of ONE humanity, one household of God. Here again these words “17 Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. 18 He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father... You’re no longer wandering exiles... You’re no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here... God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building... We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, 22 all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.”

If there was ever a statement of the expansive nature of God’s love, there it is. You are no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here. God is building a home using us all – IRRESPECTIVE OF HOW WE GOT HERE!

I wonder sometimes if we have lost sight of this letter’s audience. Is there a possibility that we have become so accustomed to “knowing” that we are members of the right tribe that when we read this today it doesn’t even enter

our minds that this letter was written to early followers of Christ? Make no mistake, those early followers were the “OUTSIDERS.”

I suspect that most of us here today have never truly known what it is like to live as an OUTSIDER. Now I’m not saying that we have not each had our own experiences of being left out, or not being chosen. Here though, I am talking about being the victim of an entire system, political, empirical and otherwise which labeled you an OUTSIDER even before you were born. This is the type of system built on the very idea of good/evil, right/wrong, in/out, and it is the system that Jesus faced head on.

Yesterday our entire family, me Amy Joshua Jacob and Emma Grace went to see a movie together. First, the fact that we were able to do this is somewhat of a miracle, especially now that Joshua has his driver’s license. You know watching your children grow up and begin building lives for themselves is a wonderful thing, but it is also difficult for most parents. Not because we don’t want them to grow up and spread their wings, because we do. It is still difficult nonetheless.

Amy and I wanted to take them to see Hidden Figures and for any of you who have not seen it, we would highly recommend doing so. This movie tells the story of the Space Race from a new perspective, uncovering the contributions of Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson and Dorothy Vaughan, three African-American female mathematicians working at the Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia. They wanted a chance to change their lives, but ended up changing history.

These human “computers,” as they were labeled in the 60’s, along with an early mainframe computer provided by IBM, created computations that enabled John Glenn to become the first American astronaut to orbit the earth. The 1962 launch of the Mercury capsule Friendship 7 transformed the Space Race, became a symbol of American pride, and led to breakthroughs in science, technology, engineering and mathematics worldwide.

While watching this movie it became clear to me that another story was being told, as is often the case when dealing with racial issues during the Civil Rights era. Both stories contained themes of bravery and courage. This other story, though, told of the ONENESS OF HUMANITY. It told us about no longer being a stranger or an outsider. It broke down the walls of right/wrong, good/bad, in/out thinking and showed us a third way of existing.

If we could always remember that all of humanity has been originally blessed in God's image, then the crushing negativity of dualistic thinking might give way to the love, mercy and grace at the heart of a Trinitarian life. We don't have to fully understand the idea that God loves all of humanity. That seems to be God's work and far too often, we get in our own way of taking part in the house God is building.

It is on us to welcome those we have labeled as strangers or outsiders because we saddled them with such labels. Right? Doesn't today's scripture tell us as much? "17 Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders... You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here..." Christ showed us a non-dualistic mindset and it will take that very mindset to process the great questions of love, suffering, death, infinity, and divinity. It will take that mindset to be unafraid of diversity and welcoming to OUTSIDERS. Luckily for all of us, being born in God's image, receiving this original blessing, means this mindset is already within us.

This is the Good News of the Gospel and make no mistake, the oneness of all of humanity violates empire and celebrates relationship. That message was revolutionary during Jesus' day, and continues to be so today.

As I close, I want you to hear these prayerful words of William Paul Young, who most of you may know as the author of *The Shack*,

"May our courage be emboldened to take the risks of trust, to live only inside the grace of one single day, to reach across Empire's borders and tear down the walls that mask our faces.

May we feel within us the eternal life of Jesus reaching through our hands – to heal, to hold, to hug..."

Dear God, may it be so! Amen!