

Diversity – A BAPC Core Value
Genesis 1:1-5, 11-12, 31
Colossians 1:15-17 and John 12:20-33
21 March 2021

You know how they say that *misery loves company*? Well, I'm not sure that's **always** true. When we're feeling miserable or have a particularly hard task to do, sometimes **company** complicates things. I remember a commercial they ran several years ago for something like Excedrin. An **older woman** came into a kitchen where her daughter was preparing supper, and when her daughter saw her pick up a spoon to stir what was on the stove cooking, the daughter growled, *Mother, please, I'd rather do it myself!* Then you hear a voice-over: *Sure, you've got a headache. But don't take it out on her.*

Well, one day, we understand from our reading in Genesis, God took on a significant task. (Or maybe it was before that one day!) God took on the **task** of creation. God chose to make something beyond God's self... to bring something into being... to give up God's state of splendid isolation... knowing – since God knows all – how marvelous **and** how complicating it all would be. What was God thinking?

For an answer, consider **this** question: What are any two **persons** who choose to give up **their** splendid isolation by getting **married** thinking? What are they thinking when they choose to bring children into their life?

What was God **thinking**? Love, I assume. Love **loves** company. Love makes **room** for company. Love **goes out** to create community; it seeks and sustains **relationship**, flows forth in caring, prefers partnerships, delights in diversity. Love **accepts** the complications and the **losses** entailed in extending love – loss of splendid isolation and the ability to control everything. Love **accepts** that, and says, *I don't regret what I did for love.*

Verily I'd say that God – **knowing** what God was **doing**... bringing into being an unimaginably diverse creation, with **all** the challenges and complications that would come as a result – God was **one brave dude!** (Or maybe three. By that point it was already complicated!) God was brave **indeed!** But, even **more** profoundly, God was **loving**. Divine **Love** was demonstrated... was ex-pressed... in God's creativity... **through** God's desire and willingness for relationship with creation... with **all** of its diverse parts, each *good* thing God made, every single being... including every one of the diverse **individuals** who are here with **us** today.

In the time of **Christ's** earthly ministry... about which the **gospels** tell us most... the **individuals** he encountered, called, drew to himself and cared for personally and

profoundly – those **individuals** came to **understand** him as an **expression** of love – Divine **Love**. Christ himself was God's own love sent into the world to save the world with the grace he bestowed on everyone and everything... on all creation.

Now there **was**, we **know**, a fair **diversity** among those **individuals**... for **Christ** connected with all **sorts** and kinds and conditions of people: Gentiles and Jews, humble and proud, women, children, leading citizens, essential workers, soldiers and civilians, the highly capable and differently able. All kinds came around him and were welcomed into his company. And the **diversity** of these *Jesus people* only grew as time went on.

Christ's death, his resurrection, and his followers' continuing **experience** of his presence and God's love, generated a **growing** community that spread quickly and widely around the Mediterranean and beyond. That **community's** understanding about Jesus **also** grew. It deepened and matured. The Apostle **Paul** articulated that the Christ who'd formed and was building up the church in love was, in fact, the One **through whom** all things had **been created** in love... things in heaven and things on earth. The whole inconceivably diverse creation had been made **through** Christ and **for** him. Amazing! And **in him**, somehow, it **all held together**. Think of that! The whole thing!

Think even about the **part** of the **all** that's the evolving Church – the community of faith Christ is still creating... its many members, diversely gifted and serving, in many ways and places, and **yet** one body... **all of them** loved by Christ, nourished by Christ, held together in Christ, and sent by Christ to **continue** ex-pressing God's love for all creation!

Mother, please, I'd rather do it myself! (Evidently, that's not **God's** way.)

I **understand** the daughter's feeling. I have headaches myself somedays. I've worked on a committee charged with writing a Ministry Information Form. I've had to herd cats in churches... some impossibly **independent** cats (bless their hearts). *Jesus*, I've thought, **wouldn't** you rather do this **yourself**?

No, he's answered. *That's not my way. I've weighed the options and the costs. I know that partnering can be problematic. But there's such rich potential in partnership for positive things to rise, for productive, generative outgrowth!*

Singularity's sort of sterile. Love builds connections... accepts and pays the cost... and sometimes... actually often... it bears much fruit. So, no, I'd rather NOT do it myself. I wouldn't. It's just not the way of love.

So, what has **any** of **this** got to do with Bon Air Church... with you and me and all the rest of us? Well, there is that interesting **juxtaposition** of two words in your Vision Statement – *diverse community* – one of which **also** has shown **up** as one of this church's Core Values: *Diversity*. Bon Air Presbyterian **values** diversity... values a **community** that's diverse and the diversity in its community... in this **curious** collection of **individuals** who are in some ways very different from each other – their politics,

passions, backgrounds, sexuality, ethnicities, ages, tastes, skills and gifts, hopes and fears. (You're diverse in ways you don't even realize – truly, one great mess of cats!) Every single one of you is **loved**... from the tips of your ears to the pads on your feet. And you're **drawn** here by love... by the love of God in Christ... every one of you. You're drawn here to be partners in a distinctive ministry. Think of the **gifts**... the **diversity** of gifts... God has **gathered** in this church for your own growth in grace and the blessing of all creation!

Now, sure – **when** you're partners in a diverse community of faith there are things you sometimes must give up... differences you have to make room for... matters that require your forbearance and love. Sometimes your grain of **wheat** goes into the ground and dies. And **then** it bears much fruit. Here at Bon Air, you **look** for that fruit. You've **seen** it here. You've seen it in yourself. Christ **continues** creating with astonishing diversity. And you get to **share** in that creative work **together with him** here. Pretty cool.

Some of you may have been around a couple **decades** ago when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA gathered 20 persons from places all around this country – pastors, professors, laymen and women – persons **representing** the whole spectrum of diverse perspectives and experiences of the national church. It was clear to the **General Assembly** that Presbyterians all over were **struggling** with each **other** over several issues – Biblical authority, Christology, who could be ordained, who should have power in the church, and sexuality. Serious matters.

And so, the General Assembly asked the twenty diverse men and women to find ways to help the church build up its Peace, Unity and Purity. They were known as the *Peace, Unity and Purity Task Force*... or, the PUP Task Force. (So, just to be clear, we've moved from cats to puppies now!) When this group **first** sat down together, several of its members later said, they looked around at each other and **couldn't imagine** coming to any agreement on the issues they'd been asked to consider. They didn't care for each other and actually wondered why they were in the same denomination. So, what did they **do**? They began studying scripture together. (A little daring!) They agreed that they would make prayer and **worship** a **central** part of their work each time they met. And they all committed to widen their perspectives by studying the work of respected scholars whose viewpoints differed from their own.

Over the course of several early meetings they laid theological, spiritual and relational foundations. And **as** those efforts **continued**, they found Christ... **building** on those foundations... building a household of faith in which they all could dwell together. They reported growing more humble, more aware of their **own** contributions to the church's conflict and alienation. And they found themselves feeling more grateful, more aware of the presence of **Christ** in each other, of the depth of each other's **faith** and commitment to Christ, and of the **wisdom** that their **diversity** brought to the Task Force and its work.

Here – in their own words – is how **they** described their experience:

*As we observed the disciplines of listening and reflection, we heard **more** than the echoes of our sins of omission and commission. We also heard the **gospel** anew and felt the **Spirit** of Christ in the words and deeds of our fellow Task Force members. Repeatedly we found ourselves moved and **impressed** by the depth and truth of statements made by our colleagues whose backgrounds and experiences so differed from our own. Most surprisingly, our **faith** was **enriched** and **strengthened** by the contributions of those whose **views** on contested issues we do **not share**. The Task Force was not exempt from the strains and pressures that afflict most groups. There **were** edgy interchanges and moments of misunderstanding. But still, it's a fact that we have been **greatly** enriched and **changed** by our work. Our experience of Christian faith and life has been extended and expanded. Our trust in other Presbyterians and respect for differing perspectives has deepened. Most of all, our joy in believing has been greatly increased by the Holy Spirit. And as a **result**, our hopes for the **future** of the church have been confirmed.*

If you haven't read their full report, I'd say it would be worth your while!

I'd also say this: Bon Air Presbyterian – **you** have reason to be **hopeful** for **your** future, too... because the diversity you value and your determination to accept and grow from the tensions that come with diversity, will make your work and witness for Christ relevant... and meaningful... in the polarized world in which we live. You'll be blessed **yourselves...** and you'll be a **model** for others. And through you, as you're faithful, Christ will certainly draw all kinds of people to himself.

I look forward to seeing that happening!