

Diversity! The word speaks truth about our world; the Creator God made and intended a world that surely is diverse! Nature is the clearest example: birds, sea creatures and land animals are so diverse! Nature shows on PBS intrigue and amaze me! So it must be with humans; unique creations! There is no other me in the world, there is no other you in the world! And Genesis says that God called the creation “good!” So diversity is good! “All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, the Lord God made them all!”

Yet... if we are honest, differences scare us; we want to avoid people who are different. We might even try to dismiss, marginalize, even demonize those who are different. That is one root of the polarization in our society: fear of difference and avoiding difference... sometimes not even on speaking terms with those who hold differing viewpoints, as is reported about our current legislative leaders. That is only stalemate and death; to co-exist, to live in greater harmony, we have to be able to talk to people with whom we differ.

Our famous Scripture reading from Paul, 1 Corinthians chapter 12, celebrates diverse gifts within the community of Christ, while advocating unity in Christ, following the “same Spirit.” We know that the church at Corinth had conflicts and divisions regarding spiritual gifts. And Paul gave them that great analogy of unity of the “body,” where the eye cannot say to the ear I have no need of you, but all parts of the body are needed, the stronger and “weaker” parts. Paul reminds us that there is extra respect or care for the more vulnerable members of the body, and so it must be for the community of Christ. In a way Jesus honored the “lowest” folks at the Wedding feast of Cana, by having them pour the water that would be turned into wine. Only they really knew where the wine came from; only they were privy to Jesus’ miraculous power; He kept his powers more under cover or hidden for a long time, so that the authorities of his day would not be threatened by him and feel the need to do away with him.

So we must do our best to welcome and honor the lowly, the most vulnerable into our communities, our church communities, our local and national communities. Can we welcome the refugee, the physically disabled,

the mentally ill, the very young, the very old, those who are different from us in race or creed or whom they love?

With an almost even split in our legislature and culture, can we honor diversity and listen well to other viewpoints? ... To mention a couple: Like many other nations, we are wrestling mightily with the problems of **immigration**. To honor diverse viewpoints, on the one hand we need to see the value, American value, of “Give me your tired and your poor.” There are sadly too many people in the world who are tired and poor, and fleeing war-torn lands! (Our area now has at least four large families from Afghanistan.) But on the other hand we need to see the value of welcoming vulnerable people in an orderly fashion if possible, with personal screening, to weed out possible enemies. Secondly, let’s take the issue of **voting**... there is a similar need to hear different viewpoints. On the one hand, we can call it a good American value that all citizens should have voice and vote, and be able to vote easily, since we believe in government “by the people.” But on the other hand, we need to have good procedures to screen voters, to be sure people are indeed registered citizens, and to keep fraud to a minimum.

Paul insisted that the unity possible in Christ comes from having the same Spirit, thus a spirit of love and truth. We admit that in Christian communities, all confessing the same Spirit of Christ, there is too much bickering and judgment. We know we have more work to do! For Christians this is part of the “ecumenical” work of the Christian body... Let’s look a couple of things in the Christian world. How we can respect and honor differences in the way we worship, the way we view the Bible?

The way we **worship** is diverse, as it should be for a creation that God made diverse. There is diverse body language. Some kneel, some stand, some raise their hands in the air, some hum softly, some sing loudly, some use electric guitars, some love the sound of a pipe organ! Some love to reenact the last supper with Christ every week, some like to reserve it for special occasions. The proverb is so true that you can’t please all the people all the time! ... The common and unifying spirit needs to be that we are all receiving God in Christ, a Spirit of Grace and Truth.

With regard to the **Bible**, interpretations and favorite verses are also diverse, as they should be. The 66 books of the Bible were written by many many authors, and we can detect slants and biases of different writers, naturally, since they wrote at different times and for different audiences. Some books and passages will be more or less relevant to each of us, in our different circumstances and different stages of life. Nancy Taylor, senior minister of Old South Church in Boston was once asked who wrote her favorite verses in the Bible, and she said “Paul.” And for who wrote some of her *least* favorite verses, she also said “Paul!” Of course! Paul advised his churches not to let women do any teaching, but to learn from their husbands back at home! And Paul said that slaves should remain slaves and be obedient to their masters. I think most followers of Jesus nowadays say such teachings from Paul are very dated, and not relevant to our times. But ... Paul also writes soaring, beautiful passages, such as the one on Love in 1Corinthians 13, saying that Love is the greatest of spiritual gifts.

The same can be said for passages in the Hebrew Scriptures... there are least favorite stories... like all kinds of war and familial abuse in the historical narratives of Israel, and prayers to God to please annihilate enemies, even dash their babies heads against rocks... real emotions and feelings and prayers of people at that time... But there are also such inspiring passages, like in the Psalms: prayers of confession like Ps 51, of lament like By the waters of Babylon, of comfort like Ps 23, of praise like Psalm 100 and Ps 150.

Then of course there are all the details and laws about worship and community in that day, since Israeli religion and government were intertwined. There were all kinds of laws that hardly anyone follows today.... Laws about women’s cycles and their participation in worship, laws about eating, laws about sexuality, laws about required animal sacrifices, etc. Certain laws are just not relevant anymore, and we can be honest about saying that! We can be proud to be part of a tradition called “Reformed AND Reforming!” Some think this might be dismissive of the Bible; No, it is simply being honest that many things in holy Scripture are bound to time and place, while we trust a Unifying Spirit at the heart of the Bible. A foremost lesson from Jesus is from his Sermon on the Mount: “You have heard it said, but I say unto you!” Jesus

was continually reforming and transforming the laws of his day. He broke religious laws when he needed to, and was always advising his listeners to find the deeper meaning to their laws.

Back to our own societal laws. Surely reform is needed. And a diverse population means more voices at the table. Our UCC Conference President, Rev. Goodwin, likes to ask the questions: “What voices are not at the table? What voices are not being heard?” Since we have just observed the Dr. Martin Luther King holiday, it is natural to ask, “Are the voices of brown and black people at the table? I have always like listening to black preachers... their style and gifts are so different from most of my white preacher friends. There tends to be more biblical storytelling, more fire, more urgency for justice, more truth-telling about the persecution that still happens, and their sermons are at least twice as long. One black preacher I follow in our UCC daily devotionals is Kenneth Samuel from Georgia. Recently he wrote that “*Gradualism* is not a friend to those suffering indignities of racism or sexism, etc.” While Dr. King seemed to be advocating patience (“the moral arc of the universe is long, yet it bends toward justice”) Rev. Kenneth Samuel seems to say: Patience has its limits! Sometimes we need to demand justice and level playing fields! And black preachers also seem to have a way with memorable slogans. Rev. Samuel adds: We don’t need “pie in the sky, by and by, when we die”..... but we need “something sound, on the ground, while we’re still around!” That statement is both political and religious: Don’t just sing promises about going to heaven, the sweet by and by, but promise us some divine justice *now*, as Jesus prayed: “thy kingdom come *on earth* as it is in heaven.”

I hope I have made a good case for honoring and celebrating diversity, in our religious communities and in our greater society. The unity of Spirit of course is the key. When differences are approached with the spirit of grace and truth-telling, with the “love and justice of Jesus” (as the UCC often says), all kinds of new peace and joy are possible. Amen.