

I often hear: How do preachers choose a topic? There is much freedom of choice, especially in Protestant churches, but the lectionary cycle of readings for the Christian year is usually the starting place. Four readings are suggested: 2 Hebrew scriptures and 2 Christian scriptures. The suggested Psalm for this morning is Psalm 133, and the opening line was just too good to pass over! “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers (and sisters) dwell in unity!” Commentators say that Psalm 133 was a favorite of Christian communities like monasteries! Here’s a little memory aid for north shore dwellers, where to find this great verse: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is... to drive along route 133!”

Now, during this time after Easter, the lectionary includes stories about the early Christians, and this year, it uses the letters of John. When I was in seminary taking bible courses, I realized that I knew very little about the letters of those early disciples. Who here is familiar with The letter of James? 2 letters of Peter? The 3 letters of John????? So.... I decided to “get educated,” and sign up for a semester of the Epistles of John! What a shock I was in for! First of all, the 3 letters only take about 5 pages in any Bible (and they are way in back, hard to find!). I thought, how can we have a whole semester on this?... yet the text book for the class was thick! As it turns out...there was a whole community started by John in the first century ... which the scholars refer to as the “Johannine Community.”

Good Bible study usually tries to figure out what was going *historically* at the the time the books or letters were written. Well, It becomes clear in a close reading that this community of John had a huge schism, much in-fighting, so much so that one group split off, and is called the “secessionists” by our scholars. Reading about the in-fighting in the 3 letters of John does not feel like reading Good News! Of course they were not alone; the Corinthian church is known to have been

one of the most divisive churches, arguing over what gifts of the spirit are more valuable. The letter to the Galatian church talks about weighty disagreements about following Jewish law. Let's face it: the early Christians had plenty of conflicts and disputes, and they were mostly about doctrines.

One of our Belleville members took a class at Andover-Newton Seminary on preaching, and the Professor of preaching said, "always move the sermon toward an ending which proclaims Good News!" Well, after telling you how much conflict riddled the early Christians, I think I can insert some Good News here, and say, "Conflict is normal, even inevitable!" One preaching professor at Princeton made the oft-quoted observation that 11:00 on Sunday morning is one of the most divided times for our society!!! Again, maybe there is some good news to insert here: that of course, since we are all unique individuals, we naturally have different thoughts and understandings when we read the history of God and Jesus in the Bible! I love what a mentor of mine often said: We can "agree to disagree, without being disagreeable!"

One of the most quoted sayings that addresses ongoing disputes among churches (and faiths) is "In essentials, unity, in nonessentials, diversity, In all things: love!" Of course problems can lie in trying to agree on what is essential, and what is non-essential! So in the community of John, the biggest debate seemed to be of the "nature of Jesus." How human was he? Or was he more a divine spirit? This debate raged on and on in early Christian history, until the Council of Nicaea in 327 C.E. came up with the agreement that Jesus was "fully human and fully divine." (Just accept the paradox, the mystery!). However, in the community of John, the secessionists apparently moved too far in thinking of Jesus as Divine Spirit, so they were accused of the heresy of Docetism (he only "appeared" to be human in flesh)... That's why the opening of the first letter makes a big point of saying, "We proclaim to

you what we have heard, have *seen* with our eyes, and have *touched* with our hands!” (Get it straight, you secessionists: as was written in John’s gospel... the “*Word became flesh* and dwelt among us!” God’s spirit took on human form!... And not only that... he lived with human feelings and growth, and he died with pain and shedding real blood, a sacrifice that we trust cleanses us from sin.)

The two groups could have tried to understand one another with love and with caring, but no, one group left, started their own church, and was then ostracized. Sound familiar? If you read the 2nd letter (only 10 verses!), we find out that people in the original community are advised to not talk with the secessionists, nor even greet them! I have problems with this attitude! What was so dangerous about their understanding of Jesus so that one should not even greet them?! Maybe being Christian, with certain doctrines, did feel like a life or death matter. Maybe those who called Jesus Lord, rather than Caesar Augustus, would be thrown to the lions... So you don’t want to be associating with more and more Christians, if there were death threats out there for professing Jesus as Lord and Christ.

I think it very unfortunate that one source of the conflict for John’s community is the prevalence of very dualistic thinking, black and white thinking. The secessionists were called “liars,” and “children of the devil,” people who were “walking in darkness.” They were accused of hating their brothers and sisters, not following the law of love. But Wait a minute... you say, don’t even greet them???.... So who is hating now?

I want to shift more to the present day... I’m thinking mostly of relating to our friends down the road at the Unitarian Universalist Church (U.U.) or “First Religious Society.” I have a very good friend there, who grew up Congregationalist, who says one of the teachings she found most helpful from sermons of Rev. Harold Babcock was that the U.U. church was more interested in the teachings **of** Jesus than the teachings

about Jesus. While I enjoy our primary focus on Jesus as Christ, Christ as head of our church, I see much merit in this posture! Look at all the battles over the centuries over doctrines “about” Jesus, doctrines “about” his nature, or “about” his presence in the bread and the wine.

I said to Roman Catholic friend of mine recently: Do we think it is worth fighting forever about: if the bread and the wine turn into the actual body and blood of Jesus... or if He is present and alive in our memory as we eat bread and wine? I said maybe the Lutherans were wise to suggest a compromise... that Jesus is present, a “real presence,” a spiritual presence, in and around the bread and wine. Bottom line for me will be the great saying, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, love!” For me, the thing about Jesus or about a eucharistic meal, is not what are we believing intellectually, but how are we allowing ourselves to be transformed, our hearts to be changed, so that we can love one another better, make peace better, live in a more Christlike way. A tried and true song says “They’ll know we are Christians *by our love!*”

So it *is* time to close, to conclude, and I think we can state Good News from this mornings readings like this: Yes, conflict is inevitable; it has been there from the time of the writer of Psalm 133, and in all the early Christian churches. But Caring can be intentional; the goal of both the Psalmist and the letters of John is ultimately that we live together with more unity of spirit, live together with more Love. We *can* disagree without being disagreeable; we *can* resolve conflicts with intentional love and understanding. We *can* make peace if that is our goal, our intention.

We pray fervently for our world leaders.... but we start with ourselves, our friends and family, our church, our wider community, remembering and praying the first line of Psalm 133: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!” Amen.