

EA: Unity in Diversity

This is the end of our fall faith series based on the book, *Everybody Always: Becoming love in a world full of setbacks and difficult people*. The author is Bob Goff. He's not a theologian or scholar, he's a lawyer who got caught up in the idea that Jesus taught us to love everybody all the time and maybe we should try it. I have to say, I think he's on to something.

The title of today's sermon is Unity in Diversity. The title itself is kind of a puzzle we'll take apart as we explore this idea of becoming love one more time. When I say Unity today, I am not referring to our church or our faith tradition. I am referring to the concept of unity. So right off the bat you might think, well I'm not sure we can get unity in diversity. Unity means sameness and diversity means differences. Oh, but wait a minute, we believe we are all one in spirit, like the song says, so the unity is believing we are all the same. Or is it weaving our differences together into one tapestry? Or what the heck do you mean Reverend Joy?

Unity in diversity is one of those paradox things I am so fond of. It once again invites us into holding our perfect divinity in balance with our perfect humanity. Even when our humanity feels so much less than perfect. Maybe because our humanity feels sometimes painful and flawed, we like to flee to the other end of the paradox—our divinity. Especially in our faith tradition, we have a tendency to skip the crucifixion and go right to resurrection. We skip focusing on our differences and go right to “we are all the same spirit”. We need more help to keep the balance of paradox—two ideas that seem opposite but when we reflect, they are equally true. For me, unity doesn't only mean sameness, it also means **wholeness**. That slight shift helps us over the speed bump that sometimes happens when we only want to look at the idea we are the same spirit. We are a **unified whole** that includes our many differences.

In I Corinthians, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. He explains this unity in diversity this way: *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would **not** make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body*

were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

The kids are downstairs exploring their senses this morning so be sure to ask them about being grateful for all their senses. And are we grateful for and seek to create unity in diversity? There are two important concepts in this discourse to the Corinthians. First: Everybody contributes and brings gifts! In the passage before the one I read, Paul calls out different gifts, service and activities that the members contribute. It is the same idea in this passage. Second: We have to see the differences without judging and have the "same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

So let's dig a little deeper into the challenges we encounter in loving everybody. Here's a phrase that gets bantered about in many different contexts when we are talking about social services, economics and humanity in general: "A burden on society". It gets a little personal for me because often the burden includes a focus on people with disabilities. But the burden is much broader. It includes immigrants, folks living in poverty and people in prison. "A burden on society" becomes a blanket statement that we throw over people we discount. It's a part of distancing that allows us to then not care about the condition of their lives because **they aren't contributing!** An oppression technique of blaming victims says, not only are they not contributing—they are **taking away** what we want and need. Distancing is not loving, unless you have a baseball bat in your hand and you're still working on feelings of anger. Then distance might be the most loving thing to do. But in general, distancing is not loving. The other thing that is not loving is the presumption these individuals—every group is really a gathering of individuals—these individuals are presumed to not contribute.

In Bob's chapter on the cost of grace he tells an interesting story about a chaplain in a prison in Michigan and another in Minnesota. These guys have groups of prisoners with their own book study working with the earlier book Love Does. So they wondered how they could do for others. Many of them are in prison for life. How could they contribute? Know what they came up with? For \$1.10 they can buy jail socks from the commissary. They don't earn huge amounts but they save up, buy the socks and mail them to Bob, who gives them away to homeless people. Prison socks are heading out into the world as loving contributions of prisoners. Have these men made some bad choices? Clearly. Does that mean they should be discounted? I think Jesus would certainly say NO! Jean Vanier is the priest who began establishing L'Arche Communities around the world based on the simple premise that living in community, even the most profoundly disabled adults have contributions to make. One of my Vanier favorite quotes may sound familiar, "We are not called by God to do extraordinary things, but to do ordinary things with extraordinary love."

Open your heart and see who you discount. Who do you consider a "burden on society" and not contributing? What if you looked a little deeper and discovered the extraordinary love in the tiniest of acts?

Another of my favorite Vanier quotes is this: "Every child, every person needs to know that they are a **source of joy**; every child, every person, needs to be celebrated. Only when all of our weaknesses are accepted as part of our humanity can our negative, broken self-images be transformed." Here is how I would change or modify the idea of "weaknesses"—those characteristics that the material world has judged as weaknesses or flaws or mistakes or things that make someone "less than" others. And maybe I have been told so often the characteristic makes me less than, maybe I have come to believe it about myself. Only when ALL of our characteristics are accepted as part of the wholeness of our humanity can our self-image be transformed. One by one we transform our image of the whole world.

To celebrate our different characteristics we have to be able to see them and honor them as part of our wholeness. To honor our diversity is not to say, "I don't see color" or "You're just like my straight friends" or "I don't even see the wheelchair" or what I sometimes hear, "You're a giant to me." One in spirit does not mean that unity has to look the same in expression. This is where we sometimes get off track. Because then the arguments arise about what is the ONE expression that we should aim for. What is normal? What is better?

The words we speak to try to convey our longing for oneness may actually convey dishonoring the unique expressions of our humanity that make us who we are. To say, “I don’t see color” you may hope to mean: I try not to make value judgments based on skin color. What the other person may hear is that in order to avoid the discomfort of admitting you have no idea about his/her experience as a person of color, you simply ignore that part of their life experience. To say, “You’re just like my straight friends” you may hope to mean: I value your friendship without regard to sexual orientation. What the other person may hear is that you believe straight is the most valuable characteristic so they will try to elevate you to that status when comparing friends. To tell me “I am a giant to you”, you hope I hear that you admire me. What I really hear is that you equate height with value and the only way to value me is to change me into your value system. To love people is to honor their unique experiences, to honor how characteristics shape who we are and express admiration, connection and love without ignoring or discounting their humanity. Loving people means we don’t avoid what we don’t understand in them or about them. We don’t pretend differences don’t exist because we are afraid of exploring different life experiences. The drive to love others has to overcome our fear of differences and our fear of being judged.

In the book, Bob describes a law school classmate, Karl. Karl was in a diving accident in adolescence and paralysis left him with the use of his tongue, his eyes and his mind. His mobility was housed in a machine that also supported his breathing so he was hard to miss in the hallways. Bob says this, “He was stunningly kind and smart and loving. What was most striking about him, though, was he found a freedom in his life most of us are still looking for in ours. He works for the attorney general’s office. He chases bad guys for a living, running towards injustice with passion and purpose. His quick mind and even quicker tongue have proven to be more than enough for him to make his mark on the world, to do justice, and to express his love for God in many ways. Karl has had five cases go to the California Supreme Court. He won five times. Karl’s life is not unlike the story of a young boy with a few fish and some bread. Jesus tells us to bring what we have and He will make something amazing out of it. [Like Karl] I think we should just keep bringing what we’ve got to God and let God decide what to do with it.”

To say to Karl, “I don’t even see the wheelchair” is not only missing the obvious, it is discounting the ways Karl has had to adapt as he lives a full and meaningful life. How many of us might see Karl in a hallway, even in the California Supreme Court building, and assume he had nothing to contribute?

The assumptions we make are on us, not the people we discount. Rather than feeling guilt or shame for errors we might have made in the past, let us resolve **today** to love one another in a way that embodies unity in diversity.

Jean Vanier also says, “Community is a sign that love is possible in a materialistic world where people so often either ignore or fight each other.” In the unified field of spiritual community, one body in Christ consciousness, let us neither ignore and discount our humanity nor fight about our human characteristics. Let us see the gifts each one brings, valuing our diversity and celebrating every child and every person as a wonderful part of our wholeness. Let us create a community, a world, where love is not only possible, it is in full expression.

I hope, if you missed part of the series, you take the time to listen to the missed sermons online. I hope you take the Practice Cards into your daily living and discover ways to become love in a world full of setbacks and difficult people. It doesn't matter what the question is, love is the answer. At least that is the practice I'm working on.