

4 Pentecost - 20 June 2010 - Proper 7 C
1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39
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There would be no miracle to our unity in Christ were it not for the reality of our differences. The atmosphere in the wider Church, arguably in the larger social context around us, is almost feverish with the desire of some to claim a commonality amongst us all that would seem to render our differences almost meaningless. While this sounds nice in theory, utopian and blissful, let me suggest again: that there can no miracle to our unity in Christ apart from our recognition of our differences.

"While I was hiking one day," writes an anonymous author, "I happened to notice a particular stone." The author goes on, "Ordinarily I would not have noticed it there among the countless others rocks and pebbles on the ground. Round, smooth at the edges, about the size of large medallion, it might have remained there anonymous and unappreciated for another thousand years. But in the sunlight that day it is glinting, it gleams; it almost sparkles. It seems to me to be trying to reflect the rainbow of colors that surround it in the world. I pick up the stone and look at it for few minutes, drinking in its beauty. Then I put it in my pocket.

"All the way home I am thinking about where I might place this rare find so as best to display its shimmering array. I have a shelf where I keep some small pieces of carved jade and ivory; and I place it there beside them. Comfortable then that I could return to it later, I forget about it for a while."

One has to assume, I think, that the prophet Elijah is himself feeling quite forgotten by God. He also probably wishes that Queen Jezebel and King Ahab of Israel *would* forget about him. The royal couple have been turning the people from worshipping God to worshipping a deity of a neighboring nation. Jezebel's people are different from Ahab's people: she and her people are not Israelites. So, to turn the people to her deity is a victory of sorts over Israel. And for Ahab and the rest of the people of Israel, it is the purchase an uneasy peace with a more powerful neighbor, and it costs them nothing more than their already-withering relationship with God. It is a compromise of spiritual integrity in the name of political expediency.

However, as prophets will do, Elijah exposes the impotence of the idol. And as happens, the prophet angers those who are highly invested in the idol, in this case the queen, Jezebel. This is why she vows to kill him. And so Elijah runs away as far and as fast as he can. As far as he can tell, there is no one else who cares about faithfulness to God. And there is no one who cares at all about him as a person. Elijah now feels absolutely different from everyone. "I alone am left," he tells God. And people who have ever felt similar to the way Elijah feels know that he is saying, 'Hey God, are my differences now driving me apart from even you?'

And it is exactly then that God shows up. First a shattering wind, then a crushing earthquake, then a scorching fire, but God is within none of these. God does not reside in the destructive forces of nature; which means that God is quite different from the deities born of human imagination. God is quite different from the expectations that people often bring to their relationship with God. And yet, none of these differences prevents God from showing up; not for Elijah, and not for you and me.

About the stone, the writer continues: "One day I glance at the shelf. I notice there, beside the little statues of jade and ivory, a small chunk of plain gray rock; not just plain, but downright ugly. What had happened to the prize that I'd rescued from desert obscurity? The writer goes on, "Where are the sparkle and the colors that had attracted me in the first place? This doesn't belong there on the shelf. I grab it up and start outside to throw it away."

Difference matters, doesn't it? Difference makes a difference.

When the apostle Paul writes, as we hear today, that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, that all are one in Christ Jesus, we can hear him almost saying that differences do not matter. We may infer even that tending to our differences is less than a faithfully Christ-like to do, just a chore to get out to the way until consciousness of our distinctions fades away. Blissful? Maybe. Utopian. Certainly. But Christian? I think not. Because Paul is not denying the many

differences among the Christians to whom he writes; he is acknowledging them. That's why he names them. He is telling them about a bond of fellowship established by Christ and enfolding these many differences. It is a bond of unity that their differences do not nullify; but it is a bond of unity that does not nullify their differences. It is a bond of unity that sanctifies their differences. This is what makes this bond of unity the important and miraculous thing that it is.

It is said often enough that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour or two in America: segregated racially; also economically, politically, doctrinally, and in terms of accessibility. This is an easy critique to make, and though accurate, it is also incomplete. Yes, the Church can be, has been, and is a source of people's segregation by our differences. But the Church also can be, has been, and is a source of our efforts to challenge the illegitimacy of our self-imposed boundaries, and a center for the celebration both of our differences and of what we have in common.

In the story from the gospel today, there are many differences between the man in the tombs and everyone else around him. Few seem worth celebrating. But this is a story of how difference makes a difference. Also, rather than try to domesticate the story by deciphering his affliction in terms better understood in our own day, by understanding it differently, I suggest we take the narrative at face value and discover the meaning is there to be found. The man is possessed by a great number of demonic spirits. This is the infamous Legion, inspiration for numerous novels, poems, and yet another scary movie as recently as January of this year. But for the disciples as they look back on this event; for the infant Church as they hear about it; what for them looms larger than the paranormal aspects of the encounter are, believe or not, the presence of pig farmers, the herds of swine; and the fact Jesus and disciples are the only Hebrew there. Everyone else on this far side of the Sea of Galilee is different.

Aside from the exorcism, the deeper and longer-lasting effect of what Jesus does here is to bring the Love of God in person to an individual and to a people long believed to be abandoned and rejected by God because

they are simply too different. Jesus helps all of them present to realize that their differences cannot nullify their relationship with God; that their differences soon will bring them all into a miraculous bond of unity.

The anonymous author has taken the stone from its place on the shelf and goes outside to throw it away. "Just as I arrive at the door," the author writes, "the sunlight hits the stone. Instantly, it shimmers; it glows with a multi-colored radiance. The beauty of the stone returns. I wonder what just happened. Then I look up at the sky. All it needs is the light from above to touch it and its unique beauty from within is free to shine again."

At work this week, at home, in Church, away on vacation, or anywhere that we may be, Jesus recognizes the differences, and wants us to recognize them, too; to notice the differences among the people around us; to notice the differences between us and those whose lives we share. And to notice how, as in Jesus' day so also in our own, some people fear differences more than they welcome the bridging of them; but, also to notice how some will come around to Jesus later on, after we show them that we really mean it when we say God's Love welcomes them.

So, you notice this week, this month, and so will I, the ways that differences provide us with harmony in our lives instead of monotony, with variety instead of boredom, with the blessing of challenge and the challenge of blessing in our lives; and with the discovery that difference itself is one thing that we all have in common.

And notice how, as in the days of the afflicted man, so also in our own, some people are rushing with us to the miracle of unity that Jesus brings, and to the freedom to celebrate the differences that cause each one to shine as only he can, only she can, as only you can, only I can, when we bring each other into the light of Jesus.

And so may God almighty and merciful, who kindles within us the love of peace in righteousness, guide us to holy wisdom and justice, that our example may lead others from the flames of prejudice to the illumination of truth, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.