

Be of the Same “Mind”

Philippians 4: 1-13

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Israel “Izzy” Kamakawiwo'ole: “Somewhere over the Rainbow/ It’s a Wonderful World”

Yes, I could have sung that for you, but I don’t play ukulele and I don’t have Izzy’s amazing Hawaiian falsetto. There’s a sweet purity and innocence to that voice that is without equal. Israel Kamakawiwo’ole - Izzy- was almost pure Hawaiian, a mountain of a man weighing hundreds of pounds with long flowing black hair. He was a natural musician, onstage from the age of ten. I heard him once, playing with his group, the Makaha Sons of Ni’ihau. Last Tuesday, the morning of the election, NPR played his song and then told his story. A wave of peace came over me – perhaps it came over you this morning – hearing this song. It carried me back to the 15 years I lived in Hawaii, and to the Hawaiian church and culture I still love so much.

Today I am inspired to tell you about “ho’oponopono “, a Hawaiian cultural practice that predates Christianity but has blended seamlessly with it. It is a way of bringing reconciliation and forgiveness within a group of related people. Elders gather all family or church members in a big circle, even those not directly involved in the immediate concern. They are encouraged to state the truth about what happened, how they feel about it, what they can do to restore unity, and ultimately how they can give and receive forgiveness. The process continues until a resolution has emerged. A simple version is: I love you, I am sorry, Please forgive me, Thank you.

Literally translated: pono means righteousness, right living on the land; ho'o means making. So ho'oponopono means making the right right, making righteousness come to pass. Many indigenous cultures have, or had, a similar practice of natural law, including the Moru clan of Equatoria, South Sudan, into which my husband Darius was born. The ancient Hebrews rescued by Moses from Egypt also resolved disputes through local judges and group process up until the time of King David. The "Law" as handed down by Moses from the mountaintop and encoded in the Hebrew Bible is all about how people ought to behave with one another: You shall not steal. You shall not kill. You shall not give false testimony etc. The Ten Commandments are a covenant of law that sometimes seems quaint and antiquated to us now. But they represent an actual legal code of behavior to which the people agreed so they might live together peacefully in covenant.

All these reconciliation strategies are locally based, being lived by people who are in community with one another and whose immediate elders or judges are known to one another. One of our daughters name in Moru, Darius' native tongue, is the word for the completion of such a process: Orelia. It means "staying in peace", a pluperfect form of the verb which indicates a ongoing state of being. Peacemaking is not about stifling our deep-seated emotions by suppressing them or trying to leave them behind, or even acting them out in an angry kneejerk reaction. It is about sharing our feelings, good and bad, in a circle of love and relationship so that we might be able to live together again and work together with equanimity.

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It's been a tough week. Whichever side of the election you may have been on, emotions have been running high and volatile. That high state of stress we've lived with for months has taken its toll on all of us. There is a tear in the fabric of our reality.....

Oh excuse me, that's supposed to be a joke. In actuality there was a tear in the fabric of MY reality on Friday.... I was having trouble with floaters and flashes in my left eye all week. A visit to an ophthalmologist revealed that I had two small tears in the retina of my left eye. Such holes need to be fused by laser surgery so none of the vitreous gel leaks out and causes the retina to detach. Upon hearing the diagnosis, I casually asked "When does this need to be done?" "Right now" he said, "Or your retina might detach."

Yikes! Talk about sudden readjustment , just what we've been trying to do in the public realm for the better part of the week. I wasn't really expecting surgery when I woke up on Friday morning. But, it is done now and healing. I can still see well out of that eye, and my life goes on.

My sudden medical procedure is a good metaphor for what happened to all of us this week: those of us who have been faced with a gigantic tear or division in their reality. Yes, I mean the election. More importantly, I am talking about the serious division this church faced about a year ago. From what I have heard, there was a similar ripping apart of the church's fabric. There is still a need for healing, for open and courageous facing of the facts and the feelings, whether that means surgery or other serious intervention, And there is also the need to heal and to carry on with life.

For me and my eye, normal life meant sermon-writing yesterday. For the congregation, what is needed – what kind of healing – to get on with the life of the church in peace and equanimity?

This is second sermon in my reconciliation series, and it's also the second time it's taken me forever to get around to talking about scripture. This lesson from Philippians, I'll confess, is not from today's lectionary but from the lessons appointed for Thanksgiving. It's the last part of the apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. Although a lot smaller than the city of Thessaloniki we talked about last week, Philippi was Paul's very first stop on the European continent. He loved that church unconditionally, and they loved him, often taking up collections to support his missionary efforts. In fact, Paul's whole letter is sort of a thank-you note to them, a hymn of gratitude to his beloved church.

Philippians is one of my favorite books of the Bible. Earlier in the book in the 2nd chapter there is a hymn, a sung part of early church liturgy:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.

The same theme is echoed and repeated in the lesson we heard today, only Paul addresses it to two members of the church in particular, Euodia and Syntache: “Be of the same mind,” he begs them.

Does this mean they have to vote for the same candidate? Do they have to think exactly the same thoughts? Are they supposed to submerge their individual intellectual capacities to some sort of Christian super-mind, and therefore avoid all conflict. No!

Who remembers a wonderful children's book from children's literature by Madeleine L'Engle, a devout Christian, called "A Wrinkle in Time?" In this fantasy the Murray children are whisked off to a "dark planet" shadowed by evil to rescue their father, a physicist who has landed there by mistake. At first on this planet Camazotz, life appears to be very earthlike. But in fact, something is very wrong. Everything is perfectly synchronized, perfectly without conflict. Eventually they discover this total conformity is controlled by "IT", a disembodied brain enthroned in a central temple, pulsating with a strong, hypnotic, evil will power and absorbing all weaker willed creatures into its orbit. Charles Wallace, the youngest Murray child, is captured by "IT" and the other family members must figure out how to save him.

"Be of the same mind" is a terrifying thought in this context. Charles' big sister, Meg, goes back to rescue him, not because she thinks she is the best equipped or the strongest – in fact she is completely terrified – but because she has the strongest bond of love with her brother. An angel gives her this friendly advice: "Think of what you have that IT does not have." Ultimately she figures out the riddle: what she has that the evil brain does not have is her selfless, particular love for her brother Charles and her willingness to let go of her own best interests. That love is far more powerful than the coercive sameness of IT and ultimately allows her to rescue Charles and bring him home.

It's worth doing a little word study to see what Paul really means when he says "Be of the same mind." The Greek root is "phrenes". Although similar to the English word "mind", it actually describes a faculty which the Greeks believed was seated not in the brain but in the torso. It's more closely related to the English word "diaphragm". The related verb means to "set one's mind upon something, to have an attitude." What Paul implies is not mind-control, not thinking identical thoughts. It is attitude control, acting with the same humility, the same compassion that we see in Jesus. We do not have to all have the same opinions, the same politics, the same theology. We are asked to have the same attitude toward the way of Christ. Being of the same mind DOES mean that we are called to behave in a Christlike way, putting others first, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, loving the poor, all the while being grateful for what we ourselves have.

Be of the same mind in Christ, Euodia and Syntache. We could insert any two of our names in there, couldn't we? Probably everyone in this congregation has someone they are still angry with over last year's blowup. Perhaps you have already worked out a forgiveness between you.. Perhaps not. But like Euodia and Syntache, you are both called to be of the same mind. You are both made up of God's breath , the spirit that moves through you with the action of the diaphragm. Be of the same mind. Be of the same attitude and behavior as the one who goes before you, Jesus the Christ. Be of the same breath.

Those Hebrews listened to Moses when he came down from Mt Sinai and agreed to a behavioral covenant which we call the Ten Commandments.

These are a good starting place, but it's useful for every community of faith to build and to us its own "behavioral covenant" to which all have agreed, ways of living and working together governed by very simple rules.

Here is an outline of one kind of behavioral covenant agreed upon within one congregation:

"Seeking to be faithful together, we covenant with one another to be attentive to these guidelines as we make decisions for our faith community. In a spirit of trust and love" we will

- Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ
- Be honest in our conversation and communications
- Listen. Listen. Listen.
- Do not work on what to say while another is still speaking
- Do not assume the motivations or experiences of others
- Regard each other as equals with our own unique gifts and graces
- Speak the truth in love
- Share our concerns in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus' teaching
- Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence, or integrity
- Not label others during or following the discussion
- Speak for ourselves only, expressing our own thoughts and feelings, referring to our experiences.
- Maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3)

- Seek to stay in community with each other even when the discussion may be vigorous or full of tension
- Be ready to forgive and be forgiven
- Support and abide by the decision of the majority even if we disagree

This is one worthy example. Each community and, for that matter, each committee or any other gathering, can make its own covenant, so that we can breathe together and be of the same attitude.

And Paul ends with:

Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God.

I hope that we at First church will continue to work on making the right right.
Thanks be to God.