

## **COMMITTED CONVERSATION: WITH THE WORLD**

**1 CORINTHIANS 12: 12-31a**

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Let me summarize where we are. We started a three-Sunday conversation last week. We said we would be tackling some tough issues over these weeks. We said the larger framework for these conversations about tough issues was our covenant with God.

In other words, our relationship with everything and everybody is determined in and through our relationship – our covenant – with God.

This covenant/relationship is a back and forth, a dialogue, a committed conversation of praise and lament, says Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann.

Praise as we find our selves in sync with God and creation – the birth of a baby; an old wound healed; the answer to some prayer. Lament when we find ourselves at odds with life – a dream broken, a relationship shattered, a hope unfulfilled.

The point is we are not independent agents but partners with God. Always challenged, pushed, called by God beyond what or who we choose to be. We are works-in-progress. Unfinished. Unsettled. Underway. This is what it means to be human. Alternating between fending off this God against whom our flimsy barricades do not shield us; and delighting in the One who is the Source of our transformation and joy.

Today we are talking about a committed conversation with the world, with our neighbor. A conversation that deals with “boundary issues.” Religious communities have always had dividing lines for determining which neighbors are in and which ones are out. Historically, the Lord’s Supper and the interpretation of Scripture. More recently the role of women, freedom of choice, and sexual orientation have become boundary issues.

The struggle over inclusiveness is the defining issue for the church today. And not just the church but much of society. The challenge facing us – this congregation and the wider Presbyterian Church – is how to find a way to talk about these boundary issues without discounting or destroying each another. My hunch is most of us are adrift on some still-to-be-worked-out, complex ocean rather than sitting on some sunny, crystal clear liberal or conservative shore.

Our church is navigating the shoals of controversy. Seeking to find ways for real dialogue. We will attempt to do that today with the Theatre for Change, and again this Tuesday when we host clergy and clerks to discuss a constitutional amendment prohibiting the blessing of same-sex unions.

Our subject today is committed conversation with the neighbor. More than anyone else in the Jesus movement St. Paul takes pains to explore these horizontal relationships with the world, with our neighbor.

Because he shepherded gentile and Jewish churches – as different as modern liberals and conservatives, as at odds as the Presbyterian Layman on the one hand and the Witherspoon Society on the other – St. Paul lived amidst social and theological cross currents and even occasional riptides.

His reflections on grace and law, freedom and discipline – the dividing lines then and now – are the ruminations of one of the greatest minds of the ancient world. He knew and dealt with the same rancor and divisiveness we witness today.

St. Paul realized that when we deal with the neighbor we are not dealing with a theory or abstraction. We are dealing with one who is near and visible and concrete.

The neighbor is that guy down the street who never cuts his grass or the kid who never remembers the plastic bag when he walks the dog or the lady who always seems to be peering from behind the curtains on the second floor. If it is true that charity begins at home it is also true that familiarity breeds contempt. Neighbors can tick you off.

Add to that the problem Jesus created for us when he said that the neighbor wasn't just the person next door or down the street but the neighbor was the alien, the stranger, the outcast, even the enemy. You see, Jesus includes a whole lot of people in this neighbor category to whom we are supposed to relate but whom we find distasteful, uncouth or worse.

Let me bring it closer to home. In the present church debates who is our neighbor?

It is, if we take Jesus and Paul to heart, not only our prayer partner or fellowship buddy or tutoring pal. It is that person who has a particular gift for rubbing us the wrong way.

On the one hand, there is a deep fear among a large group of liberals in the church of a resurgence of conservative neighbors. A resurgence of theological and moral “orthodoxy” that would limit the ability of Christians to believe and act freely. Pro-choice policies on abortion, full rights for gays and lesbians in the church are regarded by liberal neighbors as battles against their conservative neighbors over doctrinal uniformity, moral legalism and rigid exclusion.

On the other hand, there is an equal fear among conservatives of what one writer calls “promiscuous pluralism” – the collapse caused by liberals of any standards of belief and practice. This collapse is seen as evidence of the church's captivity to the culture. The willful abandonment of the church's theological tradition and moral responsibility.<sup>i</sup>

One group fears every call for theological integrity and moral uniformity as a new inquisition of the Christian Right. The other group sees every new theological possibility and assertion of personal moral choice as the loss of authentic Christian identity.<sup>ii</sup>

Now if we just let it go at that we might be able to sponsor some interesting point/counter-point sessions for the Case Library, but we will remain frozen in our fear or locked in our conclusions.

Yet, Paul says today that we are members of one another and when one of us suffers all of us suffer. So the first point in committed conversations with neighbors is that when we are speaking and listening to one another we need another sense, a sixth sense. A sense for the pain encoded in our ideological buzzwords and positions and ultimatums.

A New Yorker cartoon shows a couple watching President Bush on television and one saying to the other, “I guess we'll have to go back to feeling our own pain.”

That may or may not be true but what we are certainly challenged to do today in the church and society is to find a way to feel our neighbor's pain.

Fred Buechner said this, he said, "at the heart of any theology from Aquinas to Calvin to Tillich to, I would add, Rush Limbaugh or Al Sharpton, is a story. In their own ways and their own words, if you press them far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, what you hear is an experience of flesh and blood. A human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before *something that happened once*....a child falling sick, a loved one betrayed, a moment of shame or humiliation."<sup>iii</sup>

Committed conversation with the neighbor means honoring and respecting whatever it was "that happened once." Whatever human experience it was that led our neighbor to his or her stand on whatever the issue might be.

I have talked with many of you about your feelings on some of the boundary issues we face today. What you shared with me, in confidence and trust, as a reason for your stand on the right or the left is "something that happened once." The first step to committed conversation with our neighbor is realizing that "something happened once" for many of us.

But St. Paul calls for more than empathy. He invites us to recognize this Biblical truth – we are both many and one. That's step two. Trusting the promise of unity among deep differences. Paul's analogy of the human body is a wonderful metaphor for describing how we are each different parts of a larger whole. And here's the amazing thing: *Paul says that God is the source of this diversity.*

You can see the light bulb going on in those little first century churches. Diversity comes from God, not the devil. Diversity isn't someone's idea of a preview of hell or a bad joke. Diversity, in fact, is a pre-requisite for unity.

The problem is, says Paul to the Corinthians, you've been trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together the wrong way. Forcing them to interlock with all the Jews on one side and the gentiles on the other. The same could be said for us. All the liberals on one side and conservatives on the other. But Paul says, "in the one Spirit there is neither Jew nor gentile, conservative nor liberal. We were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

St. Paul takes us to higher ground. Step Three. In 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 1 and 4, and Colossians – Paul is a loved one pleading with a family member not to smoke or to stop the workaholicism or to change your diet. Paul is painfully aware of the bad habits and dog-with-a-bone attitude that so often did his little churches in.

So he pleads with his beloved congregations: "care for one another," "seek the more excellent way," "the way that does not insist on its own way," "no one should think more highly of himself than he or she ought," "live peaceably with all," "forbear one another in love, maintain the unity of the Spirit in peace."<sup>iv</sup>

Paul was a master at inviting others to take the higher road with him. But the wonderful thing is that Paul knows it is not up to him or those churches to accomplish this oneness amidst diversity. But the Spirit of God.

Now here's the good news today: being one with one another while being different from one another are not mutually exclusive. We do not have to choose diversity or unity.

These are intimately interdependent parts of a working whole.

Let me say it another way. Unity in the church makes no sense apart from diversity. Just as diversity in the church makes no sense apart from staying focused on our deep underlying unity.

Anything less is a special interest group. A theological action committee. A fan club for some cause about which all the members have the same opinion. Tribalism is a stronger word. And when either unity or diversity is emphasized at the expense of the other violence is done to the body. We become the hand saying to the foot, "I have no need of you," and the ear to the eye, "I have no need of you." But our ability to walk or see is taken away.

The German Evangelical Church had a wonderful saying years ago, "In essential things unity, in non-essential things liberty, in all things charity."

I'll never forget when I came home from college one weekend. It was the era when long hair was the thing to have. My hair was especially long – pony tail length. My grandparents were coming to our house for dinner and when my grandmother saw me with that long hair she was speechless. Then she had a lot to say! You see, she was a proper, blue-haired lady from the south. Anything but what we called a "Princeton" haircut, or crewcut was too long. After she told me what she thought she was a little distant all night. But before she left, she gave me a big hug and kiss. You see, the length of hair was a non-essential thing when it came to our family.

The question today is what are the essentials and non-essentials for our family of faith. Apart from the Ten Commandments for Jews or Jesus as Lord and Savior for Christians I believe, when you get right down to it, we are hard pressed to name very many other things as essential. But we are living on a new frontier today. The frontier of discovering how to create authentic community within the vast diversity of the human family.

Our task is not to assume or demand that our neighbor be driven by the "something-that-happened-once" event in my life. But by sharing with our neighbor those vulnerable moments to allow the Spirit to lead us both beyond them.

On Tuesday in the Parish Hall that's precisely what we are going to be asking people to do.

Frankly, I do not know if such a thing is possible. I am fearful that our efforts will collapse before our very eyes or result in a hardening of the lines that already divide us.

We need your prayers.

We are going to have to somehow see one body of Christ where there appear, for all the world, to be two groups locked in disagreement.

We are going to need the presence of that very same Spirit Paul says makes us one though we are many and gives us life and purpose. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Joseph D. Small, Committed Conversation, (Louisville: PCUSA Office of Theology and Worship, 1999) 5ff.

<sup>ii</sup> Small, 8.

<sup>iii</sup> Fred Buechner, The Alphabet of Grace (New York: Seabury Press, 1970) 3.

<sup>iv</sup> Small, 15ff.