
I am, because of you
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and John 1:43-51

[image: christian unity]

The week of prayer for Christian unity is over. But I could not let it pass without comment. Believe it or not, the week of prayer for Christian unity is one event that - in part - drove me into professional ministry. Because after sitting through years of such celebrations, I came to two conclusions. One conclusion was that Christian unity was not likely to happen in my lifetime. The other conclusion was that “unity” events were always exceptionally boring.

I always look forward to a stimulating sermon. But unity sermons were usually a bundle of platitudes. Vague statements about loving each other. Unexplored generalizations and cliches. The sermons were always full of "nice" sounding words. But the words seemed to be selected because of their lack of power to effect any real change in our lives. I mean, think about it. We all know that we should learn to get along with other people. So clearly, we should get along with other Christians. On the surface, Christian unity is a no-brainer. Unfortunately, celebrations of unity seem to invite no-brainer sermons!

I still remember one such unity service when my children were small. Ian was probably about 4. Young enough to stand on my legs in order to see better, and old enough to have his own opinion. By that point in his life he had spent a couple of years in a daycare with about 20 children from at least 15 different cultures and nationalities. The children's time was presented by a guest speaker. He talked at length about unity, and the need for us to love other people. Including people who were different than us. And when the speaker was finished, Ian turned to me and said, “duh”.

[image: captain obvious]

Why is it - I wonder - that a topic like Christian unity, a topic that is obviously important, can be so uninteresting to talk about. Is it because we fall back on platitudes?

Or is it because we resist seeing the barriers to real unity in our own lives and in our society? Is it because we think we are all open-minded already. That unity will happen when the rest of the world catches up to us? Is it that we like to pretend we have this all figured out already?

[image: christian denominations]

“Unity” is actually a difficult idea to define, and an even harder idea to bring to life. Because - if we are honest - we recognize that Christians, across the world and across the ages display vastly different traditions, cultures, theologies, and even values. And we struggle to accept some of those traditions, cultures, theologies, and values.

If you think I’m being too extreme - do you remember this pastor?

[image: pastor coots]

Pastor Coots was a pentecostal pastor in Kentucky who died after being bitten by a rattlesnake in 2014. The death was tragic, but the shock for most people was learning that the rattlesnake was part of the Sunday liturgy.

[image: pastor coots with snake]

Pastor Coots’s church believed - and still believes - in the power of a liturgical ritual known as “snake handling” as part of worship. This Sunday marks the anniversary of 1 full year that you and I have been in relationship. And not one of you has asked me when our next snake-handling services is.” Christians are really not all the same.

[image: Christians fighting]

Or consider the Christianity preached by Donald Trump. Do you accept his vision of Christianity that includes conflict, hatred and fear. Or do you declare that he really isn’t very Christian. I know what I do. I reject his vision of Christianity. Where is the unity in that? Am I wrong? Is he wrong? Is Christian unity just a ridiculous idea that only makes sense in Sunday School? What exactly is going on here?

[image: ubuntu]

The basic problem with Christians - of course - is that we are human beings. I think it is very human to have biases. Here’s a simple experiment: How many of us have children? How many of us had children who went to school? How many of us felt that our own children were “above average” at school? So most of us feel that our children

were above average. Do you know what the word average means? Our children cannot all be above average. It is simply human nature to favour “our own” above people we don’t know, and that’s a barrier to authentic unity.

One problem is that in general it’s hard to be self-reflective. And also that as Canadians, we believe we are essentially open-minded, tolerant people. But even if that’s mainly true, we still carry biases and preconceptions. Biases we may not even recognize. Sometimes our biases are more visible in our media, so we can always look there to see a reflection of ourselves.

[image: ben johnson]

One fascinating bias is what in Canada is called the “Ben Johnson Syndrome”. It is a condition where Canadians become foreigners when they exhibit bad behaviour. The name is connected to the once Canadian darling, Ben Johnson. Johnson you remember was born in Jamaica but became a Canadian citizen. At the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Johnson ran the 100 m sprint in a record 9.79 seconds. When Johnson did that, he was declared a Canadian hero and was metaphorically painted red and white by our media. However, when it was discovered that he had in fact cheated, in the press he instantly became “a Jamaican sprinter”.

[image: ubuntu]

If the syndrome was restricted to running, we could probably live with it, but in fact it is part of the Canadian fabric. For example a provincial political figure recently disapproved of a program to help new Canadians with their language skills. The politician referred to the program as a “subsidy for foreign workers”. In that case, Canadians - because they didn’t speak English very well - were labelled “foreigners”.

And if the syndrome was applied to all people equally, we could probably live with that too. But some people and groups are exempt. In 2013 the Globe and Mail revealed that Doug Ford sold hashish in the 1980’s as a sort of “home business”. The Canadians who supplied Ford were branded as “Somali drug dealers” But Doug was never referred to as an “Irish drug dealer”. It’s actually hard to find any examples of the “Ben Johnson” effect applied to white people. So as Canadians we can’t even discuss racism without exhibiting racism ourselves. That sounds like human nature to me. Maybe

this whole “unity” thing is harder than we like to think. And perhaps we are not as open-minded as we like to believe we are.

As Canadians, our biases are not just based on skin colour. They are based on religion too. We are all aware that in any kind of shooting, if the shooter is Muslim, our media immediately paints the person as a terrorist. In 2011 Anders Behring Breivik committed a terrorist attack in Norway killing 77 young people. The media labelled that as a terrorist attack for about 12 hours. But when it was discovered who the shooter was white, and a Christian Zionist who hated Muslims, he was no longer called a terrorist. He became a person with a mental disorder. Why did the media not label all Christian Zionists as terrorists? Or label all white people as terrorists? Why on earth does the media jump to the conclusion that all Muslims are terrorists?

It is very odd, particularly given our reading from 1 Samuel this morning. The text we read is a lovely story about Samuel learning to recognize the voice of God. It's a gentle, heart-warming story. It's a great text for a sermon, because we can discuss how perhaps we ourselves miss the voice of God in our own lives. Or we can discuss how other people sometimes help us recognize the voice of God in our midst. And that part of the story is lovely.

In the text we read, God finally gets Samuel's attention. But do you know why God wanted Samuel's attention? God had a message for Samuel. In the text that follows, we get to hear the message that “God” had for Samuel. Surely that will be a lovely story too. Why doesn't our lectionary give us that story? The reason why the lectionary ignores the message from God is because of our own biases. Because the message from “God” to Samuel is a declaration that “God” is about to perform a terrorist attack on God's own people. The idea of a terrorist “God” pre-dates Islam (and Judaism) but we are very good at ignoring that fact, and our lectionary simply dismisses that part of the Bible.

I feel like I'm getting near the end here, and I feel like I haven't said much yet that sounds very hopeful. Where do we find hope here? I find hope in our gospel today. I find hope in the fact that we can change. If we learn to recognize our own biases, we can change. If we ignore our biases, nothing will change. But if we take our own biases to heart, we can grow. We can find the healing that we need.

In John, Nathanael says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” At least Nathanael is up-front about his bias. And Philip responds, “come, and see”. Philip does not tell Nathanael to stop being biased, Philip does not tell Nathanael that he is wrong. Philip simply invites Nathanael to open his heart and mind, to come, and to be open to discovering Jesus for who he is. That’s probably the only lasting antidote to discrimination anyway - Come and see for yourself. Come and see that we - and “the other” are not so different. Interact with the people that our media tells you to be afraid of, and you will quickly find you do not need to fear.

“Come and see” is a good start. Come and see will help us get past our fears. But I see even more hope than that. Creating unity requires 2 things. One thing is to get past our own fears of “the other”. But the second part is to listen deeply to the other for new insights and teachings that they have to offer. This morning, I suggest we need to embrace an African teaching called “ubuntu”.

Ubuntu is a broad African philosophy. Although there are other names, in South Africa, the Zulu pronunciation is “ubuntu”. Ubuntu does not easily translate. But it refers to how we ourselves becomes fully human through collective respect and valuing community above narrow self-interest. One expression of ubuntu is “I am human because I belong to the human community and I view and treat others accordingly”. Another version is, "I am because we are". I prefer the version, “I am, because of you”, meaning that I cannot be complete in solitude. I cannot be complete without you. We cannot be complete without the other.

“Desmond Tutu explains Ubuntu with these words: ‘One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World. A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is

diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.”¹

Here are some other expressions of ubuntu.

[video collage - ubuntu]

We can strive to understand ourselves and others better, and to act accordingly. We can live past our own biases. We can try to live out ubuntu in our own lives.

I am, because of you. If you don't believe me, come and see.

Amen.

¹ <http://www.amyreesanderson.com/blog/ubuntu-i-am-because-we-are/#.YBFr2i3b1pQ>