

## “Unity in Diversity”

Accept that there is diversity in your midst. I am sure it has always been thus, down through the ages. But the rapid change in our society and the dramatic rise in individualism in recent decades have fostered significant diversity in the church....a degree of diversity (I would suggest) that is greater today than Paul could ever have imagined. If we take Paul seriously—that our unity is in Christ, that we shouldn’t impose conformity on (what we might call) secondary things, then how do we recognize and respect the diversity that is found even among us as Varsity Acres Church? What do we risk if we don’t?

These questions apply to people regardless of age. Diversity in Presbyterian congregations used to be about acknowledging that some came from Glasgow and some from Dundee. Today our pews are a home for people who come from many denominations. We are welcoming more immigrants who bring not only their Presbyterian heritage but the culture of their homeland. Theologically (and politically) we run the gamut from conservative to liberal.

But of all the groups and sub-groups in a congregation I am mindful of the emerging generation. We desire to pass the faith on to them. We hope they will find a second home in a congregation (our congregation) that they will find ever more meaningful throughout their lives. The question that keeps me up at night is wondering: do we do enough to acknowledge and respect the differences they bring? Perhaps the more powerful question is this: “what gifts do they bring to our faith community that will help others in their faith?” I think these questions are made more pointed by the reality of our times that it is so much harder for a young person to come to and hold fast to a meaningful faith than it was for the Builder Generation. It was a little harder for Boomers, harder again for Gen-X, harder again for Millennials...and harder now for our teens. Like I said at the very beginning, the fact that our teens today are helping lead worship is so incredibly odd by the standards of the world they live in. As they live in that world, how do we respect the challenge they face? What do we have to do to help them face that challenge? Because they can feel like the odd ones in their world out there, what can we do to help them feel like they are not the odd ones here in church, that we recognize the differences they bring, and are open to diversity so they feel even more than they do now to be a part of church?

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Text: Romans 14:1-12

Rev. Peter Coutts

I am very grateful for the presence of our young people here today—grateful because what they are doing here today is so very odd...so incredibly peculiar! They are here to help us worship a God whom they believe actually exists. Odd indeed by the standards of the world our young people live in. Now, for our young people I want to tell you a story that you will find peculiar and odd. When I was in high school (which wasn’t really that long ago) every school day began with a passage from the Bible being read and after that everyone in class said the Lord’s Prayer together out loud...every day. When I was growing up every one of my school friends went to church...not always the same church, but we all went to church. When I was a little kid I was one of 650 children in Sunday school in my church. Imagine! We used not only the space in our church building, but we also took over the YMCA next door and the curling rink. Stores were not open on Sunday. And when I was in Grade 4, people from an organization called the Gideon Bible Society came to our classroom, talked to us all about Jesus, and gave every one of us a Bible.

Do people come to your classrooms today, hand out Bibles and talk to you about Jesus? Times are different. The majority of high school students today have never once attended a worship service of any kind ever in their life. Some of those have never even heard of the word “prayer.” If people say “Jesus” it is as a swear word. One out of five students will identify themselves as an atheist. And if you tell your friends that you can’t hang out on Friday night because you are going to the youth group at your church, you run the risk of ridicule and being labelled as “intolerant”. Times have changed. When I was growing up the culture of our Canadian society encouraged and supported the Christian faith. As I say frequently now Canadian culture today is corrosive to the Christian faith. Compared to the times when I was growing up it is now so much harder for our church, for your families, to help you figure out the Christian faith, to come to know God and make God really important in your life. And it is so much harder for you to do this just for yourself.

Our dramatically changing times are also in its way changing Christianity. It can look somewhat different for teens and young adults. For many teens today to be simply told that certain beliefs are true is not good enough. Many want to know why the beliefs are

true, and why us older folk are convinced they are true. Can we explain why we believe what we believe? For some teens questions about God teeter on the desire for an experience of God's presence...because for the emerging generation to experience is to know it is true. What can help this emerging generation is us older folk speaking about our experience of God, because our experiences of God can give them insights for their own quest for God. For the emerging generation worship may not be as important compared to putting one's faith into action making a difference in the world. And studies tell us that (GENERALLY) the emerging generation of Christians at worship don't hate hymns. But as a generalization they prefer to see worship become more diversified, having elements of worship (like its music) be both old and new. Finally, younger people bring new attitudes to their faith. For example, I think it is safe to assume that Christians under the age of 30 don't understand what all the fuss is about sexual orientation.

The picture I've been painting is so very challenging for congregations. Unity is an important quality for binding us together as a family of faith. But what do we think should be the basis for unity? What do we believe creates unity? To boil it down to one idea for Presbyterians it has been conformity. Up until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century you had to believe what was spelled out in the Westminster Confession of Faith, produced in 1647. The way you lived your life had to be up to certain Christian standards. Up until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century if the session saw you were not living faithfully they would bar you from taking communion until you improved your life. I for one am glad we have become less rigid about conformity. But while we no longer insist on such strict conformity, conformity is still at the root of how we understand unity. A teenager who grew up in the church (not this congregation) one Sunday walked into the sanctuary wearing a ball cap. The usher—without a word—ripped the ball cap off the teen's head, batted the teen on the head with his hat, handed him his hat, all with an angry scowl. Not a word spoken. I watched that happen. The usher was an elder. I had "words" with the elder and an apology to the teen on behalf of the congregation. The elder was trying to teach the teen that men don't wear hats during worship...a practice we conform to. But what lesson did the teen learn? My hunch is that the experience was more alienating than unifying. This experience has become a personal parable for me. And it makes me ask the question: for the emerging generation, who so believe in their uniqueness and individuality, does building unity through conformity with how we do church work against us in what we hope for our teens and young adults? In many ways we maintain a style of church (in its worship, how we do faith nurture, form community) that we found helpful in our youth...that helped us come to meaningful faith. But is it working

for our youth today, who face dramatically greater challenges than us older adults ever did in coming to have core faith that they can sustain?

Our reading today from Paul's letter to the church in Rome is astonishing to me, because it is so pertinent to the sensitivities of our time. This congregation in Rome was experiencing a culture clash among its congregants. The majority of congregants were Gentile Christians, and they brought to their new Christian faith many assumptions, beliefs and attitudes drawn right out of their Gentile culture. The minority in this congregation were Jewish Christians and they brought many assumptions, beliefs and attitudes drawn from their Jewish background. One presenting issue was the food people believed they could—or couldn't—eat. At that time in Rome very little of the meat available for sale would have been considered acceptable under the Jewish purity laws (what today we would call kosher). In those early days the Jewish Christians generally thought that ALL Christians needed to conform to Jewish food laws. By comparison, the Gentile Christians saw this rigidity as unenlightened. They saw the Jewish Christians as "weak", unable to grasp hold of the freedom that was theirs in Christ. To put it another way, one group was judging the other for not conforming to tradition. The second group was judging the first for being bound to tradition. Another presenting issue was the Sabbath. The Jewish Christians thought it was important to honour that day. The Gentile Christians thought it was a day like any other. There was tension in the congregation because of an assumption that everyone conforming to the same practice was needed for unity.

Paul's first advice to this community was to direct the reader's attention to the real source of unity. With frankness he wrote, "Whether you live or you die you belong to Christ" (vs 8). He said, this is your point of unity. Paul wrote, "For this purpose (to make us one in him) Christ died and rose again" (vs 9). Paul was pointing to the profound seriousness of the cross: that by the death of the Son of God we might know oneness as the people of God. Point two: (vs. 10) "Why do you judge your brother or sister? Remember we will all stand before God's judgment seat." Paul was pointing back to a teaching of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. "Judge not lest ye be judged." But then the surprising bit. He encouraged an idea that diversity in belief and practice is fine as long as individuals followed those beliefs and practices out of faithfulness with integrity. And the real kicker is this: respect the other who believes and practices differently than you. If others do and believe differently than you in honour of God, tolerate the differences...accept that there are differences.