

“All Together Now”

April 22, 2018
Acts 4:32-35; John 20:19-23

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Emo Phillips told this story:

Once I saw a guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too!

Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." So I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him over!

That was voted the best religious joke a while back, and it's funny because it rings true. There are so many divisions in the church and in the world today. But it didn't start out that way, and it was never intended to be that way.

In the reading from Acts we hear: *“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”* Acts 4:32-33

That picture of the early church sounds unbelievable. I don't doubt that for a short while they were living fully in the power of the resurrection in that kind of peace and unity. I also believe that the more they were united, the more powerful their witness was to the outside world. It sounds pretty different from the modern church, never mind the world today. Though to be fair, that idyllic period does not last very long — in fact it only lasts for 2 more verses after what was read this morning!

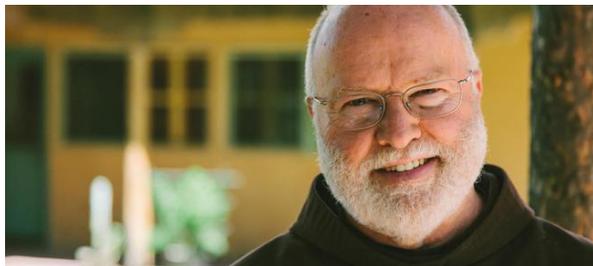
Conflict and division are part of human nature and part of life on this side of eternity. We dream of living in some kind of Utopia. Some actually expect this kind of sweet peacefulness from the church, but the truth is the church no different from the rest of the world when it comes to getting along with people, especially people who are different from us. Some might argue our track record is worse.

But it shouldn't be that way. I remember hearing about a poll that was done in a city around Easter time. They asked passersby if they believed in the resurrection of Jesus. Most said they did. Then they were asked a follow-up question: "What difference does it make?" and almost nobody could answer.

Living in the power of the resurrection should make a difference. Now there is nothing magic about being a Christian that makes us get along perfectly with everyone else, but I do think that when we become Christian, we make a commitment to follow Jesus and to be more like Jesus. Our belief should affect and change our behaviour, but does it? When belief and behaviour don't line up, we are called hypocrites.

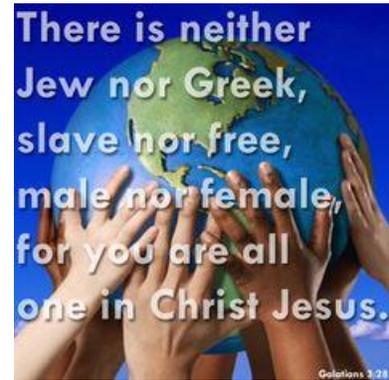
I've been increasingly concerned about polarization in politics and in society in general. It seems particularly acute in the United States where the division between Trump-supporting Republicans and Trump-hating Democrats is so, so strong. But it's here too, isn't it? Those who plan on voting for Doug Ford can't understand for a second why anyone in their right mind would vote for Kathleen Wynne, and those who support the Wynne government can't begin to understand the other side. Respect for differences — especially differences of opinion — is waning. Social media separates people. It puts us in an echo chamber where the voices we hear and the people we see end up more and more like us.

Jesus was different. Though he was clearly very "religious"— he was a devout Jew who sometimes ate and hung out with the religious leaders of the day — he didn't *only* hang out with Jewish religious people. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus healed the servant of a Roman Centurion (the enemy). Jesus constantly broke and crossed boundaries. In fact, he tended to be most critical of his own tribe. He spoke to the dreaded Samaritans and even held them up as a model of virtue. He is critical of his own religious leaders and his own disciples. As followers of Jesus we need to be very, very careful that we don't get so partisan — so entrenched in what we think is right —that we can't see the human on the other side.



Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and ecumenical teacher, often talks about humanity's love of dualism. We seem to naturally see things in a black or white, this or that, for or against kind of way. When you are in a dualistic mindset there are only two ways of seeing the world: my way or your way, the right way or the wrong way. But that's not how Jesus lived, and it's not the way we as followers of Jesus are to live. The apostle Paul hit the nail on the head when he said in his letter to the Galatians: "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" Galatians 3:27-28

When Jesus appears in the Upper Room hours after his resurrection, the first thing he says is “Peace be with you.” Then he breathes on the disciples and fills them with the Holy Spirit, saying: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.” In sending out the apostles, forgiveness is at the top of the agenda. Forgiveness is all about breaking down barriers and building bridges between people and God, and people and each other.



To do this work, we need the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit comes into our lives it changes us, and we begin to see the world differently. But it doesn't turn us into robots. We still have to act in the power of the Spirit. There is an action, a response and a commitment that follows the filling of the Spirit. Jesus commanded us to *love* one another. Loving isn't the same thing as *liking* someone. We are all different and we are drawn to some people more than others. It is only natural that you like some people, and that there are others that you don't much like at all. Jesus did not command us to 'like one another' and that is a big relief. He commanded us to love one another.

How do we do that? I remember Bill Hybels telling us we should be the first to cross the room and greet someone who is different from us. It's a conscious decision. That means looking up from our own world and group of friends and noticing someone over there that we don't know and maybe who looks different from us.

Maybe they are a different race; maybe they clearly make way more or way less money than we do; maybe they are transgendered or a supporter of *that other* political party. Make a choice to see and meet a person different from you.

I'm going to close with one of my favourite stories. You may have heard it before.



It's a true story about a true incident that happened to Tony Campolo a number of years ago. On this occasion Tony flew to Hawaii to speak at a conference. The way he tells it, he checks into his hotel and tries to get some sleep. Unfortunately, his internal clock wakes him at 3 a.m. The night is dark, the streets are silent, the world is asleep, but Tony is wide awake and his stomach is growling.

He gets up and prowls the streets looking for a place to get some bacon and eggs for an early breakfast. Everything is closed except for a grungy dive in an alley. He goes in and sits down at the counter. The big guy behind the counter comes over and asks, "What d'ya want?"

Well, Tony isn't so hungry anymore, so eying some donuts under a plastic cover he says, "I'll have a donut and black coffee."

As he sits there munching on his donut and sipping his coffee at 3:30, in walk eight or nine provocative, loud prostitutes just finished with their night's work. They plop down at the counter and Tony finds himself uncomfortably surrounded by this group of smoking, swearing hookers. He gulps his coffee, planning to make a quick getaway.

Then the woman next to him says to her friend, "You know what? Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm gonna be 39." To which her friend nastily replies, "So what d'ya want from me? A birthday party? Huh? You want me to get a cake, and sing happy birthday to yah?"

The first woman says, "Aw, come on, why do you have to be so mean? Why do you have to put me down? I'm just sayin' it's my birthday. I don't want anything from you. I mean, why should I have a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Well, when Tony Campolo heard that, he said he made a decision. He sat and waited until the women left, and then he asked the big guy at the counter, "Do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah," he answered.

"The one right next to me," he asked, "she comes in every night?" "Yeah," he said, "that's Agnes. Yeah, she's here every night. She's been comin' here for years. Why do you want to know?"

"Because she just said that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think? Do you think we could maybe throw a little birthday party for her right here in the diner?"

A cute kind of smile crept over the fat man's chubby cheeks. "That's great," he says, "yeah, that's great. I like it." He turns to the kitchen and shouts to his wife, "Hey, come on out here. This guy's got a great idea. Tomorrow is Agnes' birthday and he wants to throw a party for her right here." His wife comes out. "That's terrific," she says. "You know, Agnes is really nice. She's always trying to help other people and nobody does anything nice for her."

So they make their plans. Tony says he'll be back at 2:30 the next morning with some decorations and the man, whose name turns out to be Harry, says he'll make a cake.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony is back. He has crepe paper and other decorations and a sign made of big pieces of cardboard that says, "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" They decorate the place from one end to the other and get it looking great. Harry had gotten the word out on the streets about the party and by 3:15 it seemed that every prostitute in Honolulu was in the place. There were hookers wall to wall.

At 3:30 on the dot, the door swings open and in walks Agnes and her friend. Tony has everybody ready. They all shout and scream "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Agnes is absolutely flabbergasted. She's stunned, her mouth falls open, her knees start to buckle, and she almost falls over. And when the birthday cake with all the candles is carried out, that's when she

totally loses it. Now she's sobbing and crying. Harry, who's not used to seeing a prostitute cry; gruffly mumbles, "Blow out the candles, Agnes. Cut the cake." So she pulls herself together and blows them out. Everyone cheers and yells, "Cut the cake, Agnes, cut the cake!"

But Agnes looks down at the cake and, without taking her eyes off it, slowly and softly says, "Look, Harry, is it all right with you if...I mean, if I don't...I mean, what I want to ask, is it OK if I keep the cake a little while? Is it all right if we don't eat it right away?"

Harry doesn't know what to say so he shrugs and says, "Sure, if that's what you want to do. Keep the cake. Take it home if you want." "Oh, could I?" she asks. Looking at Tony she says, "I live just down the street a couple of doors; I want to take the cake home, is that okay? I'll be right back, honest."

She gets off her stool, picks up the cake, and carries it high in front of her like it was the Holy Grail. Everybody watches in stunned silence and when the door closes behind her, nobody seems to know what to do. They look at each other. They look at Tony.

So Tony gets up on a chair and says, "What do you say that we pray together?" And there they are in a hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, half the prostitutes in Honolulu, at 3:30 a.m. listening to Tony Campolo as he prays for Agnes, for her life, her health, and her salvation. Tony recalls, "I prayed that her life would be changed, and that God would be good to her."

When he's finished, Harry leans over, and with a trace of hostility in his voice, he says, "Hey, you never told me you was a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?"

In one of those moments when just the right words came, Tony answers him quietly, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry thinks for a moment, and in a mocking way says, "No you don't. There ain't no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. Yep, I'd join a church like that."

What kind of church do we belong to? My prayer is that we will be the kind of church that isn't just friendly to our friends and to those who are part of the Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, but a church that is willing risk making room in our church and in our hearts for the people that God sends our way ... people who may well be quite different from me or you, but who so desperately need to hear the message that God loves them.

Thanks be to God. Amen.