

Better Together
1 Corinthians 12: 21-33
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A member of the congregation shared with me just a few days ago a comment from her son, who is an active Presbyterian and lives and works in Washington, DC. The comment was made in her son's Christmas letter and she quoted from the letter and put it in my mailbox. It was interesting. Her son said that the Presbyterian Church, once again, in the year past struggled with "identity politics."

Have you heard that phrase before? It was the first time I had heard it. Since I have I've seen it in lots of different places. I am not sure identity politics is such a good thing.

Identity politics reveals the triumph of the special interest group and the disappearance of the public square. What do I mean by identity politics? It is when a battle goes on in a community or church family or nation over defining who are we, who's identity will reign supreme, who's identity will call the shots, who's identity has the power to make decisions. The battle focuses on the agenda of various special interest groups. These interest groups vie with each other until one wins. Until one triumphs. You can see the way this plays out in the very way that movies and sitcoms are made. These programs on television or movies, most of them that we see in the theaters, are made after very careful market analysis.

They are analyzing which special interest group, which age group, which income group, which education group will be attracted by whatever the story of the film or sitcom may be. Often the story of sitcom is made to speak to the special interest group.

So the result is there are very few things that we can go to together as a family or as a diverse group of people and expect to have everyone's perspective included. Just going to the show to see a good picture and then talk about it afterwards is not such an easy thing. The triumph of the special interest group.

And what that has resulted in is what some people call the disappearance of the public square. That's figurative language. But one place that you can see the disappearance of the public square is in the evolution of architecture for homes. The nineteenth century in Buffalo is rich with them. Homes used to be built with front porches.

The front porch is a place where if you are sitting out there and somebody, a neighbor, a friend or even an acquaintance walked by, you'd invite them up on the porch to have a glass of iced tea or enjoy some conversation. Chautauqua is wonderful for its porches. Not just on the first level but the third, fourth and fifth level of whatever the house might be.

In the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries the front porch has evolved to the backyard deck. And often times that deck in the backyard is insulated by a fence.

So a friend of mine, who lives in a new home in Pennsylvania in a lovely neighborhood in a little cul de sac, says here's what happens when she comes home from work.

She hits the garage door opener, the garage door opens, she pulls in, hits the button, the door comes down. She goes through her house, wanders out to the backyard to the deck. There's a high fence around her backyard. She pours a glass of iced tea. She relaxes by herself or if anyone happens to be home, a family member will join her.

There aren't many people out on the street because the children are overscheduled with their busy lives, whether it's the school year or the summer months. The streets are empty and the result is that in a small neighborhood, a little cul de sac, people rarely see each other.

The deck in the backyard is an illustration, I think, of this disappearance of the public square. It has resulted in fragmentation and disconnection. In neighborhoods of eras gone by there was a wonderfully rich fabric of life. Everyone knew one another and the members of families would watch out for the children of one another's families.

You had that kind of relationship. You had that kind of connection. But the triumph of the special interest group and the disappearance of the public square have led to disconnection and fragmentation.

Robert Putnam is a sociologist at Harvard has authored two books in the last couple of years that have wonderful titles. Many of you, I think, have read one or both of them.

The first one that came out a few years ago was called *Bowling Alone*. He said there's a phenomenon in America. What used to be a very communal sport bowling has become a loner sport. You used to join bowling leagues and devote an evening of a week to time with the guys or the gals together bowling.

But today things have changed. Bowling is still popular. But today people bowl alone. They catch a game whenever they can, after work, or on the weekend, in the evening, in the afternoon. Bowling alone is a significant sociological red flag, says Robert Putnam.

And his most recent book is called *Better Together*. That's his vision for what we need to do in our society. We need to spend more time together because when we do we're better together.

Two thousand years ago, when St. Paul wrote that first letter to the church in Corinth, he said exactly the same thing. Did you hear today when Rupert read from the 12th chapter? What Paul was saying in comparing a community, the church, to the human body is that we're better together because the parts are interdependent. They work together. And the result is better.

The church in Corinth was known in those days as...it had sort of the "bad boy" reputation among all the churches that Paul had founded. There was a lot of arguing and fighting and bickering going on in that church. It was a very fragmented church. Some people were following Appolos. Some people were following Paul. Some people said that Jesus, from their point of view, was the right point of view.

There was tremendous fragmentation among people in that church in Corinth. And Paul writes his letter to put some smelling salts under their spiritual noses to cause them to wake up and remember a few things.

Paul offers this radical thesis. He says, our differences actually draw us closer together and make us stronger. They don't push us apart.

Try telling that to one of the market researchers in Hollywood. Our differences actually make us stronger as a community. We're talking about a church or a wider community or a nation. Our differences make us stronger.

We have a wonderful illustration of this right here today in Ridley College with 35 nations represented in the student body. On this Sunday that we remember and celebrate the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King what we celebrate is his vision that all of us together are better. And so, Paul gives the church in Corinth this thesis but he said it is based on one very important operating principle. In order to be better together, to have our differences make us stronger, you'd have to see things from God's perspective, from God's agenda, from God's mission. Not from your perspective or your agenda.

And so, Paul realigned the dynamics of power. Instead of having some people give allegiance to this person and this person and this person which ended up fragmenting the power of a community, Paul said all of the allegiance must be given to God. That is what empowers a community. That is what enables the gifts to blossom. That is what makes us stronger.

I can give you an example of this, when we were at the College Hill Presbyterian Church in Easton, PA. In the late 1980s, homelessness was becoming a concern nationally. We've always had homelessness but for a variety of reasons in the late 1980s it was suddenly on the radar of many churches and social agencies and communities.

Our church in Easton noticed that there were about 20 to 25 homeless men in Easton. And as the winter was approaching the members of that congregation were concerned. The leader of our Board of Deacons who happened to be a progressive, liberal social worker who ran a very large social service agency proposed that we establish a shelter for homeless men. Right in the Parish Hall of the College Hill Presbyterian Church – a very staid, lovely church in an historic preservation community – what this church needs, he said, is a homeless shelter.

And after the initial shock wore off, people started to say, you know, that's absolutely what we should be doing. As the conversation went from person to person and committee to committee and finally came to the Session for its endorsement, the entire congregation was behind this vision. It's what we felt God was calling us to do in that moment.

But it wasn't that easy. The neighbors adjacent to the church property hired an attorney to prevent us from opening the shelter. They said you're not zoned to be a shelter. And so a conservative attorney, member of the congregation, took a legal brief to the Zoning Board and he argued our case against the attorney for the neighbors. And he said, quoting from the Book of Order, which was authored in 1789, which quotes from the Bible, that churches have been shelters for God's people for two thousand years.

Therefore, he said, I remember how eloquent he was, “when our church was established at its present address in the 1890s, it was with the purpose of, among other things, being a shelter.

The Zoning Board happened to agree. The mayor, who before that decision was agin’ us, after that decision decided it was politically expedient to get on board. And opening night at the shelter was fantastic. The television cameras were out. They wanted to see what the neighbors would do, what the mayor might do. And the whole thing came off very quietly. Like clockwork.

One of the reasons it went like clockwork, is that a very busy doctor in the congregation had worked with the volunteers who would be staffing the shelter to equip them to interact with the men, to identify health concerns or social concerns. And he came by that shelter, not every day, but throughout the winter when the shelter was open.

He had an extremely busy practice. In fact, we rarely saw him at committee meetings or in worship. But he caught God’s vision for our church. He felt this is what God wants this congregation to do. Count me in, he said, I’m at your service. When a community adopts God’s perspective, God’s agenda for mission, gifts strengthen a community, diverse gifts make a community “better together.”

Now I decided to test St. Paul’s thesis just this past week. I was in the kitchen. We have new kitchen knives and I was slicing some bread and I went right in to my little finger. It was bleeding profusely.

My stomach was growling, I was hungry. But my little finger got the attention of my stomach. My head was telling me it’s time to get back to work but we’d better do something about that finger before we go back to work.

I thought this might even require the emergency room. Is everybody willing to go to the emergency room while we take care of the little finger, I asked all of the parts of my body? Everybody was willing to go! So, I called the emergency room. I asked if they were busy? They said we’re very busy right now. I said shucks. So, I wrapped it tighter. I put some ice on it. I came back to church and thank goodness, Lenore Neiler, who’s had lots of cuts in her family with her children, said when you have a cut on your hand, just hold your hand up. It’ll stop bleeding. And it worked. You see, my little finger was suffering. And my whole body didn’t want to do anything else until that little finger was better. When one of us suffers, we all suffer. When one rejoices, as St. Paul says, we all rejoice because we are one body.

Well, we’re saying just a few things here today, by way of summing up. We are saying that the human family, designed by God, is designed to work together. To use its diverse talents and gifts so that it can be stronger and better.

We’re saying that our gifts, diverse as they are, are best used and blossom most when they are used for others.

And we are saying that we ignore anyone who suffers at our own peril.

You know that New Yorker cartoon with the boat, the lifeboat? Three guys are in the front, three guys are in the back. The guys in the back looking at the guys in the front, see a hole where there's a leak and water is coming in and the guys in the back say "thank goodness that thing isn't at our end of the boat."

We ignore anybody's suffering in the human family, in the City of Buffalo, in this congregation at our own peril.

Finally, Fred Buechner said this. He said that God calls us to the place where our great gladness meets the world's deep pain. God calls me to that place. This intersection where my great gladness and the world's pain meet. And God calls not just individuals but whole congregations to that place as well.

We're starting a conversation about a big vision for mission here at Westminster.

It started last week. Doug is going to be picking this theme up next Sunday. We'll be talking and dreaming and challenging each other through to the spring.

What we are called to ask ourselves is where that place of our great gladness, as a congregation, meets our community and world's deep pain.

I cannot think of a more important time in the life of our city and nation for this congregation to be having this discussion than right now in what is a broken world. Amen.