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20 June 2010  
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Luke 8:26-39, Galatians 3:23-29

### “All or Some?”

“*All of you* are one in Christ Jesus.”

That’s a big statement. And not an easy one.

Perhaps the biggest word there is one of the smallest - ‘all’. ‘All’ of you are one in Christ Jesus. Not ‘*some of you*’, not ‘*these special people who I like*’, ‘*all*’ of you are one in Christ.

I was a big fan of the recently concluded television series, “Lost”. “Lost” is a bizarre story, about survivors of a plane crash who are stranded on an island in the Pacific Ocean. They get lost not only geographically, but also in time, and I occasionally got lost myself in the convoluted plot twists. The crash survivors, were made up of young and old, men and women, black, white, Asian; they had a doctor, a rock star, someone in a wheelchair and numerous additional characters. It was easy to identify oneself in at least one of the characters, and to locate oneself among this diverse cast.

After some time being stranded on this mysterious island, the survivors of the plane crash discovered that they were not alone. There was in fact another group of humans living on the island, a group who became known simply as, ‘The Others’. ‘The Others’ were every bit as mysterious as the island itself. They appeared most of the time to be threatening to the crash survivors, but other times, they provided help. Even up until the very end of the story, it was not clear if their leader was a trustworthy character. By calling this second group of island inhabitants, ‘The Others’, the writers kept them at an emotional distance from viewers - constantly reminding us that these folks were not the protagonists; *not* the ones we should be identifying with.

‘*Others*’ are inherently different--not the same, as ‘us’--simply by virtue of the fact that they are ‘other’.

I wonder what is behind this apparently innate sense of tribalism among human beings - this need to create some kind of structure in which one group is ‘in’, and groups that are different are ‘out’. It creates an automatic hierarchy, where the in group is defined as normal, and the out group is somehow *less* than normal. The ‘in’ group quickly becomes that which dominates the ‘out’ group.

We all do it - just ask any Chicago baseball fan!

While sports fans keep it entertaining for the most part, this process of ‘otherization’ can actually be quite dangerous. Noted scholar, Edward Said described the notion of “Orientalism”, as a process of otherizing people and cultures--of making the Other some kind of exotic creature to be studied and cataloged, as if these groups of people were some sort of scientific curiosity, rather than human beings with history, culture and traditions fully equal to any in Europe. Those cultures of Europe were arrogantly defined as ‘civilized’ (i.e. ‘normal’), whereas the Orientals were in need of European influence and approval before they could be legitimized as their own unique culture.

Otherizing people is a dangerous path to go down, and has frequently excused terrible human behavior, including slavery and the holocaust. In spite of its danger, it is, I'm afraid, all too common. Whether by race, gender, sexuality, religion or ethnicity, it has historically been dangerous to be in a category 'other' than that which is dominant.

I'm pleased to see that in our American military, we seem to be approaching the end of the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy, an example of treating gay and lesbian members of the military as second class, 'other', citizens. I'm proud that many political and military leaders have shown tremendous courage in the move to end the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy, and I pray for the day its repeal is made law, so that all of our servicewomen and men can uphold the ideals of integrity and honesty with regard to their sexuality as well--and they no longer have to be seen as the Other.

In spite of this apparent success in the military, we have a long way to go for our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers to have their full humanity recognized. There are significant social and legal rights that married heterosexual couples enjoy for example, to which gays and lesbians do not have access. Married heterosexual couples have lower tax rates, have their inheritance rights protected and enjoy parental prerogatives that homosexual couples do not.

I realize you and I may have differing views on the issue of marriage equality, but the fact remains that denying legal recognition to all families *as families*, maintains the definition of our homosexual sisters and brothers as 'the Other', and does not allow the full expression of their humanity. Moreover, so long as their basic human rights are put up for a majority vote, their status as 'Other' will continually be used as a tool for oppression.

We have a serious and divisive immigration debate going on in our country. I have no doubt that within this room, we have strongly divergent opinions on this topic. In my reading about this extraordinarily complex legal, economic and political issue, I have been compelled by the arguments that the only way to practically fix the immigration issue in our country is to look at it through the lens not of security, but of human rights.

Security is by nature adversarial. It tends to oversimplify things, and on top of that, tends to be quite expensive. Security sees immigrants as 'others' who need to be controlled. This is most obvious in the dehumanizing terminology, 'illegal alien'. When we look at the human issues however, and see the inequality, the family relationships, the poverty, the desperation--we can no longer use otherizing terms like 'illegal alien', but begin to see them as brothers and sisters in the common struggle for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And it is at this point, that we can have a productive conversation about how to solve this problem, ensuring basic human rights to all of God's children, regardless of the geography of their birth.

"Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear." (Luke 8:35-37)

Those who had seen this man, this ‘other’, this crazy, possessed man, this man who could not be considered fully human--those who had seen the man possessed by a legion of demons, and who now was healed; who now, was human--they were seized with great fear.

Why do you think the people were so afraid? Shouldn't they celebrate this man's good fortune? Shouldn't they celebrate his returning to full mental and spiritual health?

The truth is I don't know exactly why they were afraid. Perhaps they were concerned that he might try to get married and damage the sacred institution of marriage. Perhaps they were worried he might now take a job away from a hard working, sane Gerasene; or worse, that Jesus would stick them with the bill for the man's miracle healing!

What I do know, is that seeing the full humanity of ‘the other’ can be risky. It can be difficult, and it can be costly. But at least in the way I understand the meaning of my faith in Christ, I don't have much of a choice.

“There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

The Apostle Paul wrote these words in his letter to the Galatians, because in this early church, they were having a difficult time deciding who was in, and who was out. Who should be considered ‘one of us’, and who was ‘the other’. There were many Jews who thought that in order to follow Christ, one must follow Jewish law, Torah. Paul spent a great deal of his ministry trying to convince his fellow Jews that the very existence of Jesus the Christ meant that something fundamentally new had happened. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus meant that the axis of reality was changed, and that old ways of thinking did not have to hold sway in this new reality. It was faith in God through Jesus Christ that was a new covenant, a new relationship between God and humanity. This Jewish Messiah named Jesus had come to tell the whole world that God was not just for the Jews, but also Greeks, and everyone else for that matter.

Therefore, through faith in Christ, there is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave nor free, male or female. Paul chose these identities specifically because each of them represented a power structure - a structure of domination that had been fundamentally changed through faith in Christ. He chose ethnic, social and gender relationships to signify that Jew no longer has dominance over gentile, slave is no longer subservient to free, and male is no longer dominant over female. In Christ, human difference becomes a cause for celebration, and ceases to be an excuse for domination.

I want to stress here that this oneness does not diminish our individual identities. Often, in discussions of diversity, there is a desire to wash away those characteristics that make us unique from each other. We hear statements like “aren't we really all the same?” or we might think it's a good thing to be “color blind” when it comes to race. The reality is that color is a part of who we are. Race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality--all of these things make up who we are as individual human beings and are not something to be ashamed of. Nor are they something that makes any one of us either better than, or subservient to, someone who is different from us. Difference makes us neither superior, nor inferior, to another.

Paul spent a good deal of his ministry bringing Gentiles into the church as *Gentiles*. If the Gentile identity was to be left at the church door, then all of Paul's work to welcome Gentiles into the church would have been a waste of his time. Paul intentionally wanted a church in which all people, not just some, but all people--Jews, Greeks, men, women, old, young, long-time members and newcomers--all people--could be in the one family of faith in Jesus Christ.

Scholar and preacher Brad Braxton notes that this declaration in Galatians, liberates "believers not from the tyranny of difference, but from the tyranny of sameness." Braxton goes on to note that our "faithful relationship with Christ is meant to ensure that we relate to each other, in the midst of our many differences, with mutuality and equality."

Any musician knows that harmony is only achieved when multiple voices maintain their unique identity, but cooperate together to produce harmonious music.

Finally, I want to note that Paul was someone who hoped for a pending return of Jesus Christ, at some point during his lifetime. Paul hoped that Christ would return *someday* and bring with him a revolution of epic proportions. But this 'someday' was to happen some time in the future. In this particular passage, however, this Oneness in Christ, is not something that will happen someday in the future. Paul writes in the *present tense*. There *is* no longer Jew or Greek, there *is* no longer slave or free; there *is* no longer male and female--for all of you *are* one in Christ Jesus. Now! Today!

Brothers and sisters - this is the good news Paul has for us: through our faith in Christ, there is today no longer gay or straight; there is no longer CEO and warehouse worker; there is no longer old timer or newcomer; there is no longer citizen and immigrant; saint or sinner; there are no longer divisions of domination and exclusion, separations that keep some people 'in' and other people 'out'--for *all of us are one* in Christ Jesus!

Amen.