

UBUNTU
SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
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Are you "liberal" or "conservative"?
Are you pro-choice or pro-life?
Are you Evangelical or Progressive?
Are you a Yankee or a Southerner?
Are you pro-NRA or pro-gun control?
Are you about Black lives or Blue lives mattering?
Anti-vaxer or vaccinator?
Is climate destabilization real or a hoax?
If I do enough of these binary questions, do you know what will happen?
I'll create enough categories so that everyone here has their own, unique label.
And we might even be darned proud of that.
Individualism is one of those American values we're steeped in, like tea bags in hot water.
Being unique, our own self-made person, is our national birthright.
The thing is, that means that there are going to be a LOT of people,
who don't agree with us about something.
Being around people who don't agree with us can be really annoying.
Evidently, humans don't like being annoyed.
When it comes to the issues that are really important to us,
we prefer to listen to the people who already agree with us, who won't annoy us.
We bring our American attitude into church to us.
Emo Philips, an American comedian, tells a joke
that one British site called the best religious joke ever:¹
Once I saw this 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."
I said, "Die, heretic!" And I pushed him off the bridge.

That's one way to get rid of someone who annoys us.

¹ *The Baptist on the Bridge*. <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>

Indeed, in this country, we increasingly believe that getting rid of someone who annoys us is our right, often physically, as in Virginia Beach on Friday.

Spiritually, verbally, it's open season in this country: we just blast anyone who disagrees with us with name-calling, mockery, and even threats.

What if I were to make the claim that people who follow Jesus

not only must NOT get rid of people who annoy us,

we even have to give up our secular right to avoid being around them?

On the very last day of his life on earth, Jesus spent his time with a group of people

who had to be way beyond annoying. Jesus knew that, among his very own band of followers,

one would betray him, one would deny him three times,

and they would ALL give up on the whole project of proclaiming the gospel,

and scatter as soon as the religious and political tyrants crucified him

as one more petty nuisance to the powers that be.

As Jesus said, in the world we have distress;

even God with skin on was subject to the distress of the world.

King David lived in distress – much of it his own making, we know –

he pled for God to be his strength and shelter, and God saved him from violence.

Jesus, from the house of David, also knows his Father is always with him.

Unlike David, however, the Father did not rescue Jesus from human violence.

Instead, the Father accompanied the Son as he walked into the darkest pit:

he was nailed to a cross, abandoned by his companions, and left to die.

God in Christ did not overcome the traps of death by escaping it,

but by entering it and then overpowering it with life –

eternal life, the life of the Eternal One, who is healing Creation.

Jesus sums this whole life-giving process up as “glorification.”

We like to see glory only as the miracle of Resurrection,

but for God, the glorification of Jesus started in the majesty of heaven before time began,

that glory then enveloped his whole human life, including humiliation, torture, and death

at the hands of those God came to heal and serve.

It is part of the glory of God that, knowing exactly what's coming,

Jesus prays for the ones who will betray, deny and abandon him,

and he prays for us, the ones sitting here today listening to these words,

people who still struggle to believe this good news of hope and Eternal Life

when the world is in so much distress – All. The. Time.

What does Jesus pray for us? That we will be delivered from distress? Not really.

He prays that we will trust – utterly, completely trust –

that we are not alone in the distress that is human life.

How are we not to be alone? We are to become one –

with God, yes, but also with each other; he says, *I pray they will be one,*

Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

What does it mean to for the followers of Jesus to be ONE in a world of distress?

Unfortunately, the English language doesn't have a word for it this kind of unity.

No worries – one of the most esteemed Anglican Bishops the world has known,

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, taught us Western Anglicans

– by the way, Episcopalians are Anglicans –

a Bantu word that covers it: the word is UBUNTU.

Ubuntu means “I am who I am, because of who we are together.”

Repeat that with me: “I am who I am, because of who we are together.”

Archbishop Tutu said, *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.*²

For Tutu, the hallmark of the Church should be Ubuntu.

Each of us proclaiming, “I am who I am, because of who we are together.”
 Maybe the teaching of a liberal black foreigner isn’t persuasive to all of us,
 so, I offer the teaching of a conservative white Presbyterian pastor
 named Charles Drew, who didn’t use the word Ubuntu, but he did say this:
“Church” is not an event. It is people—people whom God calls us to love.
What is more, it is in a very important sense, an involuntary community of people:
we don’t choose our brothers and sisters—God does.
And sometimes (oftentimes) those people are not terribly compatible with us—
not the people we would choose to hang out with.
However . . . the church is supposed to be a sociological miracle—
a demonstration that Jesus has died and risen
*to create a new humanity composed of all sorts of people.*³

Sounds like Ubuntu to me!

We, the church of followers of Jesus, are supposed to be a sociological miracle:
 with all of our individual binary choices, labels, preferences and opinions,
 we each are who we are because we are all together and are “perfectly one,”
 Jesus says, because we are one IN the One God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
 The purpose of this one-ness in church, however, is not to make us all the same.
 Unity is not uniformity! Ubuntu does not lead to sameness, but to mutuality.
 Our one-ness together gives each of us, individually, a “proper self-assurance”
 that comes from having the courage and support to be who God created us to be.
 For us not to demand uniformity and sameness from others,
 for us to accept that difference and disagreement are characteristics of a healthy church,
 we need one more quality: the humility Paul talks about in Galatians.
 The humility, especially for us Westerners, to realize we can do nothing to earn God’s grace,
 to stop clawing our way to the top of the heap, determined to be RIGHT. ALL. THE. TIME.,
 to let go of the need to win every single battle through physical, verbal or spiritual violence.
 Ubuntu, the one-ness Jesus Christ prayed for, is never about winning and losing,
 it’s about realizing that we truly need each other to learn about who God is.
 It’s about being crucified with Christ; like Jesus, to die to the power structure of this world,
 and let Christ live in, through, and with us to serve and support others, especially those who annoy us.
 This is the essence of Ubuntu, the sociological miracle of the Church:
 the community where I am who I am, because of who we are together,
 where I become more who I was created to be than I could become by myself.
 In an Ubuntu community, we are humble enough to listen to those who are differ,
 and do so with so much openness that we risk having our minds changed.

² <http://www.tutufoundationusa.org/desmond-tutu-peace-foundation/>

³ Charles Drew, *A Journey Worth Taking: Finding Your Purpose in This World*. P&R Press, 2007. Pastor Drew is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America, known as a “conservative” denomination.

They say that it's a woman's prerogative to change her mind,
 but we all know that's not supposed to be a compliment;
 it's a bit of snark about women being weak-minded and unsure of themselves.
 It's this kind of snark that brings distress in the world
 where we all have to be right every single moment
 or hang our heads in shame at having lost an argument.
 As I was contemplating that this week, a thought dawned on me:
 listening to someone who thinks differently from me is an act of love and trust for both of us,
 and it is a way that we serve each other because we both give something.
 Isn't that exactly what Christ did? He is a Lord who came not to be served,
 but to serve by sharing his teaching, his healing, his very being with others,
 meeting them exactly where they were and listening to their lives.
 As I've said often: I've never learned a thing from anyone who already thinks all the same things I do,
 and who agrees with me on everything.
 In the past 30 years, since I began taking my faith journey seriously,
 I've changed my mind a thousand times because someone made me think,
 including some people who annoyed the living daylights out of me.
 Each of us is a child of God, a unique incarnation of the divine life,
 even when we do not agree on who God is or what God is like.
 Because of what you reveal, I will learn more about God.
 This puts both Ubuntu and Church in a whole new frame for me:
 Left to ourselves, we would not choose to be with many of those around us.
 But we are most definitely not left to ourselves!
 And we don't do the choosing, God does.
 Since the grace of God has conquered the whole world, all must have been chosen by God.
 In the midst of a world in distress, the followers of Jesus reflect the glory of God
 by hanging out with those whom God has chosen, trusting them and being trusted,
 loving them and being loved, serving them and being served, being Christ to each other,
 so that not one of us is ever, ever left alone.

COLLECT OF THE DAY

O God, form the minds of your faithful people into your one will. Make us love what you command and desire what you promise, that, amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found: your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

2 SAMUEL 22:1-7, 47

David spoke the words of this song to the Lord after the Lord delivered him from the power of all his enemies and from Saul. He said:

"The Lord is my solid rock, my fortress, my rescuer. My God is my rock—I take refuge in him! He's my shield and my salvation's strength, my place of safety and my shelter. My savior! Save me from violence! Because he is praiseworthy, I cried out to the Lord, and I was saved from my enemies. Death's waves were all around me; rivers of wickedness terrified me. The cords of the grave surrounded me; death's traps held me tight. In my distress I cried out to the Lord; I cried out to my God. God heard my voice from his temple; my cry for help reached his ears."

PSALM 97

The LORD is King; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of the isles be glad.

Clouds and darkness are round about him, righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne.

A fire goes before him and burns up his enemies on every side.

His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees it and is afraid.

The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.

The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.

Confounded be all who worship carved images and delight in false gods! Bow down before him, all you gods.

Zion hears and is glad, and the cities of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O LORD.

For you are the LORD, most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods.

The LORD loves those who hate evil;

he preserves the lives of his saints and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

Light has sprung up for the righteous, and joyful gladness for those who are truehearted.

Rejoice in the LORD, you righteous, and give thanks to his holy Name.

GALATIANS 2:16, 20-21

However, we know that a person isn't made righteous by the works of the Law but rather through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. We ourselves believed in Christ Jesus so that we could be made righteous by the faithfulness of Christ and not by the works of the Law—because no one will be made righteous by the works of the Law.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live in my body, I live by faith, indeed, by the faithfulness of God's Son, who loved me and gave himself for me. I don't ignore the grace of God, because if we become righteous through the Law, then Christ died for no purpose.

JOHN 16:31–33, 17:1-2, 20-26

Jesus replied, "Now you believe? Look! A time is coming—and is here!—when each of you will be scattered to your own homes and you will leave me alone. I'm not really alone, for the Father is with me. I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world."

When Jesus finished saying these things, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, so that the Son can glorify you. You gave him authority over everyone so that he could give eternal life to everyone you gave him.

"I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. I'm in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.

"Father, I want those you gave me to be with me where I am. Then they can see my glory, which you gave me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

"Righteous Father, even the world didn't know you, but I've known you, and these believers know that you sent me. I've made your name known to them and will continue to make it known so that your love for me will be in them, and I myself will be in them."

SERMON HYMN: *Will You Let Me Be Your Servant*

BLESSING: The God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth, who walks where least expected, who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the distressed, and whom death could not control, now sends you out to announce with your lives that the Lord is risen indeed. Go, you are blessed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.