

## *Conversions and Convictions: This Is Who We Are*

***Be Found:** In a community where our differences are treasured as signs of beauty in the eyes of creative God.*

### [Acts 2:1-12](#)

I read something recently that seemed very true to me: that the essence of marriage is a promise to stay with the mysteriousness of another person for the rest of your life. The surprise of that statement is in the word ‘mysterious’. Its truth is that even in a good and long and close marriage, no two people ever understand each other completely. Always there will be different ways of thinking and being and feeling that separate you. We talk about this in premarital counseling—how important it is to a good marriage to see the differences between two partners—different ways you were parented, the different ways your family celebrated holidays and thought about birthday gifts, different philosophies about loading the dishwasher—not as stubborn marks you work to erase over the course of your marriage, but valuable to your relationship. They are differences to be claimed and accepted, part of how this relationship makes each of you better, a more whole person.

That is easier said than done. It’s a natural human tendency to want to be with people who are like us. Early in our lives we learn to find our place in a ‘we’. ‘We’ is one of the basic building blocks of human life. It names our people, our identity, our home. It helps us adjust our lives for efficiency, comfort, even safety. We look for a marriage partner with whom we have as much in common as possible, to give that marriage its best chance of succeeding. We go to a gym that has people like us working out in it. Restaurants where ‘our people’ go. We go to stores that ‘get us’. When we’re in a neighborhood where no one else looks like us, we’re a little more cautious, alert. We surround ourselves—especially in our most central relationships, in our friendships, even our workplaces—with people we don’t have to work so hard to understand, or to love—because relationships are hard enough already.

But ‘we’ also establishes an edge. It creates boundaries on what we take in, and even see. It’s like wearing an invisible set of goggles that filters out some things—some people—from our vision. Mostly we’re not aware that we have those goggles on, so we hardly ever go to the trouble of taking them off. And so, we begin to believe that everyone sees things like we do—and we think that’s what clear sight looks like.

Just say the word ‘we’. Your mouth opens up, almost like a smile. You take air in to say the word. It feels comfortable. Now practice saying ‘they’. See what you have to do with your mouth? It’s almost like sticking your tongue out. You expel sound and breath. ‘They’ is a word that pushes away, draws a boundary, a distinction between people. ‘They’ is defined by ‘not we’. I think most of us would say it is natural to divide the world into ‘we’ and ‘they’.

What comes naturally to us is not always God’s best hope for our lives.

We’re talking in these weeks about the promises Campbell United Methodist Church makes with the ‘brand’ we put out into the world, the things we say about who we are and what’s important to this congregation. Last week we talked about the first one: **Become**. Become who God cre-

ated you to be—fully human, fully alive. We noted the value that lies underneath that promise: a lifelong process of personal change and transformation.

Today I want to talk about the second of our promises: ***Be found...in a community where our differences are treasured as signs of beauty in the eyes of a creative God.***

In the 1960's, Martin Luther King, Jr. called Sunday morning at 11:00 am “the most segregated hour of the week.” He was right. Living in a multi-racial society, doing the hard work of equal rights, making the effort to be sure that every person is treated with dignity and fairness, or claiming that fairness for yourself, is hard work. On Sundays, people felt like they needed a rest. They rested by going home and to church in places where they knew they could find people just like them. That's still true in much of the United States, no doubt much of the world. There are white churches and black churches, Korean churches, African churches. The Armenian church where I grew up, where every single person has dark, frizzy hair and an over-sized nose.

More recently, people of goodwill have discovered that diversity is a gift. That life is richer when we are surrounded by different points of view, people with different experiences, a cultural mosaic that stretch our thinking about how things are ‘supposed to be’. Many churches are working hard to broaden themselves, so that at least a few people of a different race or ethnic background might come. Before I came to this church, I served two churches where we were enormously pleased to have one black family in a mostly-white congregation.

Clearly that is not the case here. One of the greatest assets of this church, the thing that our Sunday morning visitors (especially young people) find appealing, the thing that regularly calls us to the truth of what is *supposed to be* a challenging faith, is this church's diversity. Being part of a community of people who are not all alike. Opportunities to learn about different ways of being the world with exercises like we did this morning. Sharing food from each other's cultures. Watching children who will grow up knowing that differences in skin color and heritage and immigration status make no difference to the ways you sing and play bells together, how you take in the stories of your common faith tradition. This is the vision that Pastor Daniel has carried for this church for the past twelve years: one congregation, African, Anglo, open: worshipping together, encouraging one another, living as one community. This is what I see here, and what I too hope we are becoming.

Here, diversity is not a burden we must deal with, or tolerate. Here, we know that our differences are beauty marks—gifts from a God who created and then announced ‘good’ a ridiculously wild and colorful natural world. A God who thought armadillos and Venus fly traps would be clever additions. Here, we believe that God hoped this extravagance of imagination would enrich our lives.

I don't mean that this church can be complacent about its profile, or that our work is done. Diversity requires us to work harder. We have to listen more carefully, to hear and understand each another speak with African and Filipino and Iranian and American accents. We have to stop sometimes and say, “Wait; can you say that again? I didn't understand,” or “Tell me why it's like that.” We have to try things—food, music, prayers, leadership styles—that are not familiar and not always comfortable. Every week when we plan worship, Pastor Daniel and I have to negotiate between the new hymns I like because they express my faith and the missionary hymns

he grew up with and loves. In a diverse community, we cannot assume that others will share ‘the way it has always been’ for us. In a diverse community, we have to learn to speak about the things that just come naturally for us, and to stand aside to allow and welcome and honor the things that just come naturally for others.

I think this has been God’s vision for the Church all along. We heard a hint of that vision in the Pentecost story we read this morning. The birth-day of the Church began with twelve disciples who knew each other well. They’d all come from Galilee, the same region of the same country. A blue state; they didn’t even have to discuss their political views with each other any more. They spoke the same language; they’d experienced God in similar ways. They’d been through a common loss—the death of their teacher, Jesus. They’d all been there when he appeared again; they were all similarly confused about what this all meant. They were bonded with each other by these common experiences; it was natural for them to huddle up together, to find comfort in their familiarity.

And then this thing happened, something they could explain afterward only with words like ‘wind’ and ‘tongues of fire’. Whatever it was, suddenly they felt strong, full of conviction about a truth that they’d been unsure about until that very moment. Some power came into them, a power we now call the Holy Spirit. And the very first thing that happened with that power—the first thing the Spirit did—was to speak to people in different languages.

Get this; it’s important. The presence—the power—of God in human life didn’t show up as the strength to tear down buildings or the ability to fly or a set of arguments that would always convince other people of your better point of view. It showed up as a voice in each of those disciples’ mouths. A voice that spoke to other people about God in their own languages. From the *first moment* of the Church’s life, we are told that in *this* Church, God speaks many languages. The Holy Spirit’s *first work* is to break down the walls that divide people. Not by converting everyone to the same language, not by erasing our differences, but by honoring those differences.

First on the Holy Spirit’s to-do list: remind humans—us—that God’s love is wide and inclusive beyond our wildest dreams. It was as if God said in that moment, “Look at this beautiful world out here: different kinds of people, many languages, strange customs you thought would always separate you. Let me introduce you! I think you can do wonderful things together.”

And they made a church. Did they understand each other every day after that? Probably not. It was messy. There were misunderstandings. They offended each other from time to time—maybe often. Someone forgot about the vegetarians and put chicken in the soup. The bread was not always gluten-free. The cassava leaves had too much spice.

The Holy Spirit’s message to those disciples was not: Organize yourselves, perfect your worship service, figure out your committees and raise some money; then you might think about adding some of those foreign people who live in the neighborhood. The message was: Now. The *first thing* about the Church will be the message of God’s extravagant-and-always love, delivered in every language people can hear.

I heard someone point out recently that one of our regular human interactions has changed in recent years. See if you think this is true. When someone does something for you—gives you a gift, or considers you for a job or hands you ketchup for your french fries—you say, ‘thank you’. The traditional response is ‘You’re welcome’. ‘You’re welcome’ says something about a momentary relationship that’s been created between those two people. The person served has entered the space of the giver; ‘you’re welcome’ acknowledges that the giver’s intention was to extend and open herself to that exchange. Literally, I suppose, ‘you’re welcome’ says, “In the way it just happened, you are welcome to enter my world, my ‘we’.”

Now, often, instead of ‘You’re welcome’, you hear ‘No problem.’ Someone hands you a coffee; you say ‘Thank you’, and the response is ‘Not a problem.’ Do you hear a difference? ‘No problem’ means “You haven’t inconvenienced me. I haven’t had to extend or trouble myself to make this exchange. Our interaction hasn’t complicated my life at all, and that’s what makes it OK.” As if the way human interactions are supposed to work is for us not to trouble each other, ever.

In Church—in this church—we step outside the non-obligating, sacrifice-free zone that is life in this fast-paced, impersonal society. Church says something more than ‘no problem’ when it includes you...and when it includes people who are quite different from you. In a Church made up of followers of Jesus, we are meant to see and carry and share in the problems of other people. Of one another, but also of people outside the church, people who will never step inside this space.

This is the promise this church has committed itself to practice. To say, to *every person*: Here, you can bring your difference *and* belong. We will take off our goggles, so we can see you as you are. With God’s help, we will work to speak, and to listen, in your language, the way you can hear. We will extend the limits of ‘we’, over and over again.

Because we are part of God’s work in the world. Work that will not be done until *every person* is found.

Resource:

Mark Labberton, *Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus*, IVP Books 2010