

Is our world diverse or divided: YES!

Do you remember the Coca-Cola ad for the 2014 Super Bowl celebrating America's diversity by featuring a beautiful rendition of "America the Beautiful" sung in English, Tagalog, Spanish, Hebrew, Hindi, Keres, and Senegalese-French?

I personally was deeply touched, but many Americans reacted negatively.

Our diversity divides us. I understand that everyone struggles with diversity at some level, and it seems we settle on our divisions.

There's a song from my generation sung by Sly & the Family Stone titled "Everyday People" that touts our diversity, "different strokes for different folks..."

But the hook for that song is a verse that seems to be just as relevant today as it was some 45 years ago:

*There is a long hair
that doesn't like the short hair
For bein' such a rich one
that will not help the poor one
There is a yellow one
that won't accept the black one
That won't accept the red one
that won't accept the white one...*

We don't like certain beliefs or lifestyles. We set up our groups, our blogs, our websites, our walls, our arguments, our ammunition to prove our point, defend our division, destroy the diversity.

President John F. Kennedy, in a commencement address, said "If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can make the world safe for diversity."

So how do you feel about making the world safe for diversity?

You see, way before I learned that song from Sly & the Family Stone, I was taught by Mrs. Mack in our little kids' Sunday School class:

*Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

I didn't know it at the time, but that was my introduction to Pauline theology as that is what Paul was writing to the Corinthian churches, in particular, how reconciliation is the restoration of relationships.

He encouraged the church to spread the gospel by bearing witness to the unity, harmony, and peace that Christ ushered into the world through the Holy Spirit:

"From now on, we regard no one from a human point of view ... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

I confess I don't understand all there is about reconciliation. I know it has a lot to do with forgiveness, and it has to do with accepting the fact that our commonalities are more important than our differences.

I think it was William Sloan Coffin who said something to the effect that it's not so much how we are different from 'name your enemy', as it is necessary that we recognize the common bond we share in our sinfulness.

A little over a year ago, the Conference of National Black Churches hosted an interracial religious gathering in Charleston, SC, in response to the massacre of those nine worshippers at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church.

The president of the group, Jacqui Burton, said, "We really see this convening as a launching pad for at least a three-year focus on race and reconciliation and to look at convening these kinds of conversations across the country."

What saddens me is that in my lifetime I was in those same kinds of conversations in the 1980s in Canton, MS, and in groups at Youth Conferences in Montreat during the 1960s

We can keep turning back the pages on our own church history and see that we have been having these same kinds of conversations for over 2,000 years.

When I wake up on the cynical side of faith, I have this crazy picture in my mind where we are the Wile E. Church Coyote chasing the Road Runner of Reconciliation - always getting close but then the Acme Anvil of Divisive Distrust and Violence and Vitriol drops on our dreams and leaves us choking in a cloud of despairing dust!

The fact of the matter is that contemporary conflicts surrounding race and gun control, environmental stewardship, war, immigration and refugee policy, and gender and sexual orientation that divide us did not suddenly appear out of nowhere.

Like the Corinthians knew, the empire then and now nurtures inequality for its pecking order of power and prestige to divide and, I wouldn't so much say conquer, as I would to divide and keep things copasetic.

Like the Corinthians knew, almost every congregation today has its own divisions and diversities - people trying to live under the same roof with different convictions, perspectives, opinions, and prejudices.

But it is frustrating when Christians use theological gerrymandering and biblical acrobatics to foster division and distrust, and churches become mirrors of the same fears and anxieties that shackle our society.

It's what happens when we claim Psalm 8 for "our kind of people" - that we are the only ones of whom God is mindful.

When this happens, as someone said, "churches become carnival funhouse mirrors that distort the real image of who we are."

As I've learned from so many good people over the years - God's grace is too wide, God's mercy is too deep, God's creation of a diverse world suggests so clearly that our differences in how we think or how we look, our theologies, our politics, our emotions... are not meant to divide, but as we are created in the image of God, then we all have something to learn from each other about God.

That's what I think Paul wants us to discover. In other words, when a person becomes a Christian, redeemed by Christ, brought into a relationship with God - we are a new creation; he or she is not a product of his or her culture or society any longer.

According to Paul, being "in Christ" makes a radical, revolutionary, and transformative difference. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

It is not a modest difference. It is not a subtle difference. It is not a partial difference.

According to Paul, this "if" changes "everything."

If we are in Christ, **if** we accept the forgiveness that God freely offers in Christ, **if** God is truly loving, holy, forgiving, gracious, and able to create new life in Jesus as proved by the resurrection, then something different takes place for us, with us, in us, and is possible through us.

The whole order of life is changed and constantly changing.

We are delivered from our addiction to guilt, delivered from our petty insistence on keeping score, delivered from our notions of moral hierarchy based on the color of our skin, what pew we sit on, what side of town we come from.

As a new creation, we become a citizen of the kingdom of God.

We are part of God's scandalous grace that embraces prodigal children whether they are prodigal like us or prodigal in different ways.

We embrace them because they are like us in Christ, like us in being forgiven, and like us in being beneficiaries of the scandalous grace of God that will not be held hostage by religious conventionality, political power, economic class, or anything else.

That's the horizon Paul saw as he began to pioneer a path into these difficult conversations with the Corinthians by reminding them of who they are, why they do gather together...

Because God is in the forgiving and reconciliation business, God has not simply forgiven and restored us to the divine family, but has given us stock in the business with Jesus Christ.

As Paul said, "we are ambassadors for Christ since God is making his appeal through us."

That's what it means to be "in Christ." We are licensed to be agents, promoters of reconciliation in a diverse and divided world: to love people shunned by others, embrace people who others declare untouchable, and celebrate reconciliation because this is God's dream for us.

Because God has brought us into the family business of reconciliation, instead of taking sides, we are to follow the way of Jesus Christ.

As St. Basil said, "I cannot persuade myself that without love to others, and without, as far as rests with me, peaceableness towards all, I can be called a worthy servant of Jesus Christ."

You and me, in the family business with Jesus, who continue to pioneer the ministry of reconciliation in a diverse and divided world where:

Red and yellow, black and white

They are precious in His sight

Jesus loves the little children of the world.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.