Sunday, February 4, 1973
THE BEAUTY OF DIVERSITY
Acts 10:25-29; Galatians 3:27-28

In early NEW TESTAMENT times, Jews and Gentiles were miles apart in their customs and practices and were different in many other ways as well. To a conscientious Jew, Gen-tiles were not only different, but not to be associated with.

Thus, it is not surprising that one of the earliest con-flicts in the early Christian Church was whether or not Gentiles could become Christians in the same sense as Jews who had become Christians, and furthermore could Christians who had been Jews even associate with Gentiles no matter how religious those Gentiles might be.

So, it was not unusual for the Apostle Peter to avoid persons who were not Jewish. In fact, there existed in his time a who1e book full of regulations which insisted that Jews have no dealings with Gentiles and if they had to have any dealings, it needed to be done in certain prescribed ways.

This is the background of the story which was just read to you from the Book of Acts in the New-Testament. Peter had a vision which instructed him to go to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman, and visit and preach to him. If Peter had done what his first impulse urged him to do, he would have avoided Cornelius like the plague.

As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter lifted him up and said, “Stand up! I too am a man.” And going into the house Peter found many other persons there and said to them. “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or visit any one of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality.”

Not long after that some of the other apostles and church leaders heard about Peter’s visit with the Gentiles and criticized him for it. Peter, however, talked about his vision and his conclusion that God makes no distinctions between persons.

It was after that that the early church agreed that all persons of whatever nation, color of skin or cultural background, tall, short, stout, thin, bald, hairy, male, female, rich, poor, slave, free, prisoner, were welcome into the church without any distinction or rank. They celebrated the beauty of diversity. And the early church did not ask a person to give up his own culture or color in order to become a follower of Jesus Christ.

Thus, Paul could write to the Galatians, what we read as the second part of our scripture reading — "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

But since then, Christians have not always celebrated the beauty of diversity or the variety of cultures and races.

In 1910, when Branch Rickey was a coach for Ohio Wesleyan, the team went to South Bend, Indiana, for a game. The hotel management registered the coach and team but refused to assign a room to a black player named Charley Thomas. In those days, college athletics had few black players. Finally, Mr. Rickey suggested that a cot be put in his own room which he

would share with the unwanted guest. The hotel manager wasn't happy about the idea, but he gave in.

Years later, Branch Rickey told the story of the misery of the black athlete with whom he had shared a room. He remembered that Thomas couldn't sleep. He sat on that cot and was silent for a long time. Then he began to cry, tears he couldn't hold back. His whole body shook with emotion. I sat and watched him, not knowing what to do until he began tearing at one hand with the other — just as if he were trying to scratch the skin off his hands with his fingernails. I was alarmed. I asked what he was trying to do to himself.

"It's my hands, he sobbed, they're black. If only they were white, I'd be as good as anybody then, wouldn't I Mr. Rickey? If only they were white!"

"Charley," Mr. Rickey said, "the day will come when they won't have to be white!"

Branch Rickey never forgot the incident and it was the memory of it that gave him the motivation to bring the first black player into professional baseball — Jackie Robinson, and to endure the threats and hostility that brought upon Rickey.

It's a strange fact that we human beings, in spite of the Christian witness, in spite of the New Testaments words that we should not consider any person common or unclean, often continue to dislike, distrust, and mistreat those who are different from us.

"All in the Family," the delightful television series makes us all laugh while at the same time probing some of the most sensitive human problems among us. Archie is like many people in that he avoids the unique and different. He has no lost love for anyone who differs from him in race, color, politics, income, nationality, or religion. If he had it his way, he would steer a wide circle around anyone who happened to be black, brown, yellow or red, Roman Catholic or Jewish, Polish, or Italian. If they're different, avoid them. leave them alone. Archie has trouble celebrating the beauty of diversity.

The problem is that we human beings can't stop with a live and let live attitude toward those who are different. Once we declare a person or group worthy of avoidance, it activates a cycle that nearly always moves on to the next stage — that of accusation.

If they deserve to be avoided; if they're different from me, then there's bound to be something sinister or suspic-ious about them. And if I avoid them long enough and keep my distance from them far enough, I begin to imagine all sorts of immoral, evil, filthy, suspicious practices with which to accuse them. Lack of interaction and communication breeds suspicion.

I know persons who have never really known a black person, an Indian or a Jew and who therefore all the more imagine, without evidence, all sorts of evil sinister things about them. In fact, to hear them talk, you would think they were experts on groups of persons they had never met.

Peter had never been in the home of a Gentile before. He didn't know what to expect of Cornelius and his family, and you can bet he didn't expect to find a family devoted to God. He was amazed to find these religious qualities in a gentile.

The hotel manager in South Bend Indiana who wanted to keep the black athlete from sleeping there didn't know what to expect from someone different and didn't want to find out.

There are still many clubs and places even here in Lincoln, that do not allow blacks or Jews as members or patrons and for no good reason except they are different.

Unfortunately, throughout h1story, the next step after avoidance is accusation. History records many a tearstained page of people and groups who have suffered terrible slander and even death just because they were different.

Jesus of Nazareth had the problem as did the Christians in Rome. Look at the Jews in the Middle Ages and in Nazi Germany, and now in Russia. Remember the Mormons in this country, or the American Indians, or the Blacks, or the Amish, and the Quakers, as well as many different ethnic groups from European countries who were often laughed at in school if they spoke their native language. or some- times punished.

And so, it has gone down through the years. Anything that has seemed strange or different or diverse is put aside or cast out or made fun of.

In the bestseller, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, as Jonathan begins to practice flying in different ways from the other seagulls, his parents are very much dismayed. “Why, Jon, why?” his mother asked, “why is it so hard to be like the rest of the flock, Jon?”

And as Jonathan continues to practice and to perfect new ways of flying, he is one day called before the Gull Council. He thinks he is going to be honored for learning some new different ways of flying as a gull. But no, he is to be punished for trying to be different.

“Jonathan Livingston Seagull,” says the Elder, “Stand to Center for Shame in the sight of your fellow gulls!” “For his reckless irresponsibility,” the solemn voice intoned, “violating the dignity and tradition of the Gull family.” “Life is the unknown and the unknowable, except that we are put into this world to eat, to stay alive as long as we possibly can.” Nothing more.

Jonathan tries to reason with the council. “My brothers,” he cried, “Who is more responsible than a Gull who finds and follows a meaning, a higher purpose for life. For a thousand years we have scrabbled after fish heads, but now we have a reason to live — to learn, to discover, to be free! Give me one chance, let me show you what I’ve found.”

The flock might as well have been stone. “The brotherhood is broken,” the gulls intoned together, and with one accord they solemnly closed their ears and turned their backs on him.

A philosopher named Socrates had a similar problem many years ago. He dared to be different. He asked probing questions about traditions and practices and beliefs and was finally put to death. We have trouble tolerating persons who are different.

Yet our Christian faith over and over again emphasizes that we are not to try to do away with diversity and difference, rather we are to celebrate it and appreciate it, include it and learn from it. A black person is not to be asked to become a white person to be accepted, or a Jew become a gentile. A person with German heritage who is now an American citizen, does not have to renounce his cultural background.

God asks us to drop our pretensions of wanting everybody to be just like us or ourselves to be like everybody else. That’s not the meaning of equality. We are to attempt instead to enlarge

the range of our sympathies, so as to delight in every cultural and racial difference. We have so much to offer each other from the wide variety of difference.

In fact, in the whole mysterious gift of life, what most astonishes and excites is diversity. No two human beings are the same. The tiniest snowflake, the most distant star, the intricately veined leaf of a tree, each are unique. From Jack Rabbit to giraffe, from crocodile to swan, from tiger to hummingbird, nature delights in varieties of form and phenomena.

Overwhelmed by this profusion, the human being's deepest intellectual drive is to understand, to classify, to find self-consistent structures, to organize and when calamity or chaos overtakes human beings, there is a built-in need to put things back together, to achieve order and organization and new purpose.

But within this same drive, there is also something menacing--the drive to order and structure — the drive to sameness and conformity which then also carries with it the drive to control and to make everything fit one scheme and the beauty of diversity gets lost, and we are all the poorer for it.

Too often we want to keep things all the same and at the lowest common denominator. That's what the friends of Jonathan Livingston Seagull wanted to do. They couldn't tolerate any difference in behavior or goals.

It's depressing when the human effort moves toward suppressing variety. In law, politics, technology, economics, education, and religion the greatest danger is the tendency toward a deadening sameness, toward a loss of diversity for the sake of control.

Many of our Christian missionaries made the same mistake. They insisted that newly converted Christians must dress like Americans and adopt most of the American culture, American hymns, and forms of worship.

Today, even in the world of fashion, there is a tendency toward sameness. And now with the technology of mass production, there is even a greater temptation toward sameness because what is fashionable can be made most profitable if the same fashion or pattern be imposed on the largest number of consumers. Thus, the motherly woman in Akron who wears a size 16 is found wearing the same style as the younger size 10 in New York.

We need to keep alive the beauty of diversity in all areas of our living. Few persons like housing developments where each house looks exactly the same as every other one — row upon row.

And we can learn so much from diversity. Much of the progress in the human race has come about because persons have dared to be different.

Furthermore, one of the most beautiful sights in our time is the rebirth of cultural ethnic festivals like the Czech festivals in Wilbur, Nebraska, or the black festivals in Harlem — all the folk festivals where groups of people remember and celebrate their diverse cultures from the past — not because they want to remain in the past but because of what that culture or tradition has contributed to the whole of the human family on earth. Dignity comes not simply from money or occupation, but from belonging to a culture, a people, and participating as part of it.

We can celebrate the beauty of diversity and profit from it if at the same time we give also our loyalty to a higher unifying God who transcends all our differences and makes us one family which includes our diversity and differences. That's the good news of our faith!

The whole life of Jesus was an act of this kind of inclusion. Whereas many of the religious people of his time were setting up categories by which to exclude others, he included them.

His life ended in a death which he offered on behalf of all people. Thus, the people who celebrate the beauty of diversity are followers of that man named Jesus.