Book 24

Sunday June 14, 1992

FINDING UNITY IN DIVERSITY I Corinthians 12:12-27

We're hearing a lot of talk these days about morals and values in our American society. Last week a member of our congregation gave me a copy of the Newsweek magazine which had its cover story on that subject. The headlines on the cover asked these questions, "Whose values? Whose justice? Whose morality? Whose community? Whose family?"

These are difficult and important questions because a society is primarily held together by its morals and values when they are agreed on and

held in common.

In fact a good case can be made for the argument that the recent Los Angeles riots were not simply an explosion of racial rage caused by a collapse of law, respect and civility. It was an implosion of a society caused by a moral vacuum. There was nothing to hold the community together.

Human history, including the Bible, reminds us that communities and nations if they are to endure, depend on a common core of values--and that when these drain away, communities and nations exist only in name. Because such core values cannot be imposed--even by government or other raw power for very long, if a society is to endure, these morals and values need to be

generally agreed on and commonly held.

Why do we need common values to hold us together? Because the hostility of one tribe for another or one group for another is among the most instinctive human reactions. Unless a common purpose binds us together, tribal hostilities, ethnic loyalties and other things that tend to separate us will drive us apart.

Look at what's happening all over the globe. Ancient tribal and ethnic hostilities are creating havoc. Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, India, South Africa--all are in crisis. Ethnic tensions disturb and divide Sri Lanka, Burma, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Cyprus, Nigeria and more. In our own country we are seeing a resurgence of ethnic suspicion and hostility which leads to

violence.

Recently I've been doing a lot of reading in the history of our nation so as to understand why we've succeeded as much as we have. Many countries break apart because they fail to give ethnically diverse peoples compelling reasons to see themselves as part of the same nation. The United States has worked thus far, because it has offered such reasons.

What is it, in the absence of a common ethnic origin, that has held Americans together for over two-hundred years? To begin with we have been a multi-ethnic country from the start because we are a nation of immigrants from many different parts of the globe.

In 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote back to a colleague in France, "Imagine, my dear friend, if you can, a society formed of all the nations of the world...people having different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories...without a national character, yet a hundred times happier than our own?"

What held us together? The answer, Tocqueville concluded, lay in the commitment of Americans to democracy and self- government, in other words, civic participation.

Not too many years later, Abraham Lincoln declared in his Gettysburg Address, an expansion of the same idea, that what holds us together in spite of our differences, in spite of the Civil War, is our dedication to the proposition in the open-

ing statement of the Declaration of Independence. Here's how Lincoln put it, "Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." And he ended his brief two minute speech by looking to the future, "that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth." A common commitment to such high values as these, even though imperfectly realized are what hold a community or nation together.

We can find unity in diversity only when we agree that what binds us together is more important

than the issues that divide us. And for those of us who are Christians, it all begins with the one God who created and creates all human beings as equal, not in talent or ability, but in value.

However the fact that we human beings frequently allow such things as ethnic origins, color of skin, sexism, and other issues to divide us, so much so that we even become violent with each other is nothing new. The Bible is filled with such conflicts.

As an example from the Bible, consider the church congregation in Corinth. It was a divided church and many of us know from personal experience that there is nothing worse than a church fight. The congregation was divided into a number of factions.

Some members of the church were saying: "All things are permissible." By that they meant that sexual conduct is as morally indifferent as eating. Another group claimed that since they had ecstatic experiences their faith was somehow deeper and that God's Spirit was working in them more than in those who did not have such experiences. And there was a debate among others about the meaning of the resurrection. There was also disagreement about Holy Communion, how it should be served and its meaning.

To make matters worse, some members of the church were saying that the personal gifts or talents they possessed were more important than the talents or personal gifts which others had. One member would say, "I have the gift of prophecy, so I'm better than you," or "I have the gift of

speaking in tongues and this means that God's spirit is working through me more than through those who do not have this gift."

The Corinthian congregation, like our country, was made up of people from many different backgrounds. It was a highly diverse collection. Some came from a Jewish religious origin, others came from different forms of Greek religions and still others had no religious background to speak of.

The Apostle Paul who had organized this congregation and was still considered to be its spiritual leader, had no fault to find with the zeal and enthusiasm of some of its members. Yet he also knew that such zeal has need of correction and direction and discipline if it was to be saved from

unspiritual excess.

Paul also knew that manifestations of the Spirit of God are to be found in wide varieties of conduct, experience and expression. God works through the gifts and talents of each one of us.

So first Paul had to remind the congregation in Corinth that there can be a diversity and variety of gifts but all come from the same Spirit of God. He wanted them and us to understand that unity and diversity are not necessarily contradictory, but rather can complement each other.

To illustrate this point, he used the metaphor of the human body. Our physical bodies are made up of many different parts. And no one part is more important than another. Paul asked, "Is

your ear more important than your eye? Is your nose more important than your hand or arm? Or suppose your whole body was one big ear? Where would be the sense of smell, or touch or taste, or sight? We all need the diverse parts of our body working together if we are to be healthy individuals."

Furthermore Paul was asking another basic question: what's more important, the fact that you are a nose or that you're part of a human body? As a nose you cannot exist by yourself. And your body would not function as efficiently without a nose. We might ask ourselves, "What's more important, the fact that you are of German ancestry, or the fact that you are now a United States citizen?"

This metaphor is not only a good one for Christian congregations, but also appropriate for other communities and nations as well. It is possible for us to live together in peace while affirming our diversity and yet living in unity. I repeat, unity and diversity need not contradict each other as long we are also agreed on a higher purpose.

What are some of the implications for us as Christians and Americans?

1. It means first of all that we are to affirm and celebrate diversity. This is not as easy to do as we might think both in our churches and in our nation.

In our culture and within the Christian faith there have been two themes which have been in con-

flict most of the time. One theme is openness, generosity, inclusiveness, a spirit which is not afraid of but instead affirms diversity.

The other theme is intolerance, suspiciousness and conformity, a way of thinking that says, unless you look like me, dress like me, act like me, and believe exactly the same as I believe, I want nothing to do with you and neither does God. It's also believing that I and my group have all the truth, or that my ethic origin has more value than yours.

I often wonder, what is there in human beings that drives us toward conformity and sameness? What is it in us that makes us suspicious and even afraid of people who are different from us?

Why do we set up so many artificial barriers among us? Why do we punish people who are or try to be different?

Is it because we seem to have an innate fear of the unknown and therefore we are afraid of people who are new to us and different?

Our Christian faith emphasizes over and over again that we are not to try to do away with diversity and difference, rather we are to celebrate, affirm, appreciate and learn from diversity. Other's people's gifts can make up for those gifts we ourselves lack.

God wants us to drop our pretensions of wanting everybody to be just like us, and we do not have to waste so much of our effort trying to be like other people. Equality does not imply sameness

or conformity. Rather celebrate diversity. Think of it, in the whole mysterious gift of life, what astonishes and excites is diversity. No two human beings are exactly the same. The tiniest snowflake, the most distant star, the most intricately veined leaf of a tree, each is unique. From jack rabbit to giraffe, from crocodile to swan, from tiger to hummingbird, nature delights in varieties of form and phenomena. The rainbow is beautiful because it is made up of so many different colors.

2. Secondly, in addition to celebrating and affirming diversity, each one of us needs to find what our own unique gifts are and then develop them. If you have the gift of teaching, then be a teacher, or the gift of music, then develop that gift. Or perhaps you have the gift of administration, or

hospitality, or any one of a number of other gifts.

Too often we ignore some of our best gifts and want a gift or talent that someone else has. Rather than celebrating and developing our own uniqueness, we want to be like everyone else.

Even though the metaphor, "melting pot," served us well for describing the American experience for a number of years, perhaps it's time for a new metaphor. To some, a melting pot indicates that we will all blend together and no longer celebrate our diversity.

Perhaps this nation is more like a patchwork quilt made up of all kinds of blocks, patterns, shapes, colors and materials, yet all stitched together into one quilt, one nation. And the thread that holds

us together, our love of liberty and our love of a government that is of the people, by the people and for the people, is more than what divides us. An individual patch is not more important than the quilt, in fact the patch gets some of its significance by being a part of the quilt.

Perhaps too, the Church of Jesus Christ is also like a patchwork quilt comprised of all kinds of patterns, colors, shapes and materials, all stitched together by the Spirit of God. It's very much like the metaphor of the human body which St. Paul used for the congregation in Corinth. 3. Thirdly, as Christians and as United States citizens we need to rediscover and work together on those higher values which unite us so that this patchwork quilt will hold together in all of its beauty and diversity. Amen.