

**INVEST IN THE GOOD NEWS: CELEBRATE DIVERSITY**  
Ephesians 4:1-6

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Thursday night I played pickle ball with a friend. We played against a couple from Avon Lake, and when we were finished playing, the four of us chatted at the net for a few minutes. This is how the conversation developed. We were trying to figure out who we knew in common, the woman said I looked familiar, it was one of those conversations. We realized that two of our children had been at Avon Lake High School at the same time, had even briefly dated. Then the woman mentioned that her son now works for the FBI and is working on a really big case. You can probably imagine what came next in the conversation...talk turned quickly to the case of Judge Kavanaugh and soon, opinions were flying around the court faster than most of our balls had been. But I just stood there, as if paralyzed. I didn't want to express my opinion. I knew it wouldn't change anyone else's mind. Or heart. I didn't want to argue. I didn't want to hear any more at all. I couldn't wait to change the subject to the weather, sports, anything but politics.

That morning I had read an editorial entitled, "The American Civil War, Part II" which included this paragraph, "We can't find common ground on which to respectfully disagree; the other side is 'the enemy.'" One senator said this week, "Tribalism is ruining us. It is tearing our country apart. It is no way for sane adults to act."

I'm not here to talk about how we should behave as citizens. That's not my calling nor my expertise nor my job. I'm here to talk about how we should behave as Christians, to explore what it is that the Bible has to say to our present situation. What is the church's role at this moment in time? What is OUR role as people who follow Jesus?

As it happens, I had selected our scripture passage for today months ago. I selected it with World Communion Sunday in mind, this day when we think about the scope and the breadth of the global church, and what it is that we all have in common. We know that today, our Christian brothers and sisters throughout the world are breaking bread together. The bread is different, the songs are different, the clothing is different, but, as Ephesians puts it, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism." Today we remember that the things we have in common are so much more significant than the ways in which we differ. We are all seeking to follow in the ways of Jesus. Our differences are to be celebrated, not to be feared.

Ephesians also has this word. Let it sink in. Feel its power. Imagine how this word could transform our world: "I encourage you to live as people worthy of the call you received from God. Conduct yourselves with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Accept each other with love, and make an effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit with the peace that ties you together." How are Christians to conduct ourselves at this moment in time?

How would things be different in Washington, and for all of us, if political discourse was humble, gentle and patient? What if we really sought to listen to those with whom we disagree? To learn more about them and why they hold their positions?

I don't know that anyone disagrees that this is a particularly fraught moment in our union. The only disagreement is over whose fault it is. I listened this week to both Democrats and Republicans blame the other side for the polarization. That dialogue reminded me of the times in the gospels when the disciples argue among themselves, each claiming to be the best, each claiming to be Jesus' favorite. Instead of listening to Jesus, they're following behind him bickering childishly.

The energy that is spent blaming and demonizing the other side is a complete waste. It's serving no one. Meanwhile, those most in need of justice and peace and hope and opportunity are being left further behind and vulnerable.

But our worship series is about good news. So here are three good news stories for you.

In 2016, following the presidential election, two people attended an anti-Trump rally in Austin, Texas — for two very different reasons.

Amina Amdeen, a Muslim student at the University of Texas, protested outside of the Texas State Capitol building. Joseph Weidknecht showed up with pro-Trump signs and a Make America Great Again hat. Amina noticed Joseph. He was being surrounded by people who were angry at his presence at the rally. Joseph was one of the few Trump supporters in attendance. Just at the time Amina noticed Joseph, somebody snatched his hat off his head. She remembers what happens next this way: "And that's the point where ... something kind of snapped inside of me because I wear a Muslim hijab, and I've been in situations where people have tried to snatch it off my head. And I rushed towards Joseph and I just started screaming 'Leave him alone!'" Though Amina was unsuccessful in retrieving the hat, Joseph says he was grateful that

she stepped in to defend him.

"I don't think we could be any further apart as people, and yet, it was just kinda like this common 'that's not OK' moment," Joseph says. So Amina and Joseph got to know each other. Up until meeting Amina, Joseph says his view of the Muslim community was influenced by news articles, most of them negative. "She is genuinely the only Muslim person I know..."

They took the time to get to know each other. This is what Amina told Joseph: "I was born in Baghdad, Iraq. I moved to the U.S. when I was 10 years old," she says. "Being a Muslim girl, I stood out in almost every single way that you can, in middle school, the worst time to stand out."

Joseph said that he has lost friends since the election because of some of his political views. "So I hope that I can be the reason that someone decides to talk to someone as opposed to just cutting them out of their life, or blocking them on Twitter," he says. They both would like to encourage other people to engage in more conversations with people they don't agree with.

Second story. Derek Black grew up in the south. Everyone in his family was involved in the Ku Klux Klan. His godfather was David Duke. He grew up believing what his parents taught him, that white people are superior to others and that it would be better for everyone if all the races lived separately. His family was close and loving and he had no reason to doubt or question them. But then he enrolled in college, and began meeting people of differing opinions. It didn't take long for his classmates to realize who he was, but he was befriended by two of them who wanted to get to know him as a person. Through their friendship, and through meeting Jewish people and

people of color, he came to be horrified by his past comments and behavior, and to realize how cruel and harmful they were. He finally was led, strictly by his own conscience, to recant his entire cast in a statement that included these words:

“Minorities must have the ability to rise to positions of power, and many race issues are in fact issues of structural oppression, poor educational prospects, and limited opportunity.” He is now a graduate student in history and is telling his story widely. It’s a beautiful, powerful, hopeful story redemption, only made possible because people of differing opinions took the time to get to know one another as people.

Here’s the final story. This also occurred shortly after the election, the weekend that many people were in Washington DC, some of them for the inauguration and some of them for the Women’s March. Rosalynd lives in DC and attended the Women’s March. She works at a restaurant called Busboys and Poets, a DC institution which is also a bookstore and a cultural hub which hosts readings, lectures, and gatherings. The bookstore features artwork and books by people of color and generally attracts a liberal clientele. Three men sat down at one of the tables and Rosalynd learned they were from West Texas, in town for the inauguration. They asked her about the restaurant, and seemed genuinely interested to learn that it was named for the African-American poet Langston Hughes. They told her they’d never been in any place like that before.

The group left quietly after their meal, but when Rosalynd went to pick up their check, she noticed a long note written on the receipt. “We may come from different cultures and may disagree on certain issues,” the note read, “but if everyone would share their smile and kindness like your beautiful smile, our country will come together

as one people. Not race. Not gender. Just American.” Then Harris saw that they had left her a \$450 tip on a \$72.60 bill. One of the men, Jason White, a dentist from Lubbock, Texas, is the one who paid the bill that morning.

Neither Rosalynd nor Jason shared this experience at first. It was other servers at the restaurant who began talking about it and making it public. But after the event made the news, Rosalynd and Jason connected on FaceTime. Jason said, “We have to respect and love one another, no matter how much we disagree with them.” Rosalynd says, “It was about two people who were authentic with each other, who looked past these pre-judged views that could be misconstrued, and who saw each other and had a pleasant exchange.”

“I hope that people just don’t see it as this white guy helping this black girl,” she says. “This gracious gesture came from a place of compassion and love, I honestly believe. It’s human.” This experience has shown her how important it is for Americans to be honest and kind to one another. “We need to see the things that make us similar.” Any of us can do what Amina and Joseph and Rosalynd and Jason have done. We can even try to befriend those with whom we disagree, like Derek Black’s friends did. We can see one another as people. We can humbly realize that we have much to learn from one another. We can decide to engage with one another respectfully.

When our Jewish ancestors were starting to return home, after their long exile, they were talking among themselves about how to approach the challenges of rebuilding their community. Through the prophet Isaiah God sends them a message, telling them that their religious practices would only be meaningful if they resulted in a

better community for all people. At one point, God says, “Don’t fast just to make yourselves feel more holy and righteous. If you’re going to fast, be sure you’re also feeding the people who are hungry.” And then, God says this to the people of Israel, “This is your task. Rebuild your ancient ruins. Raise up the foundations of many generations. You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.” You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the one who mends what is broken, the one who builds bridges between people.

Friends, we are called to be engaged citizens, to learn about candidates, to vote, to express ourselves to our elected officials. But it seems clear to me that we cannot depend on our elected officials to set the standard for moral behavior. They are mired in a system of blame. It is up to us to change the dialogue, to set an example, to BE the CHANGE we want to see, as Gandhi so eloquently said. There is no room in the Christian ethic for demonizing or blaming, name-calling or dismissing.

The anger in our nation is fueled by fear, fear of the other, and fear dissipates when we see one another as human beings, instead of labels.

I still don’t want to engage in politics at the pickle ball court. But I do want to act as if I truly believe that God created each of us with differences, for a reason. And those differences are worthy of both respect and celebration, for our differences reflect the fullness of the glory of God.