

Sermon for September 16, 2018

Embrace Diversity

James 3:1-12 and Mark 8:27-38

The Reverend Roger Pancost

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of having lunch with a couple who are new to this church. After spending some time sharing details about our lives, these individuals began asking me questions about the United Church of Christ, Midland.

At one point I was asked if the people in this church have different opinions. Now I know that those of you who have been a part of this church for a long time may find this question humorous. Anyone who has belonged to this church for a while knows that people have different opinions about everything! Just volunteer at the Rummage Sale if you don't believe me!

Having said that; I believe that this is a legitimate question for a new person to ask. Knowing that the United Church of Christ, Midland, is different from other churches in our community because of our commitment to inclusivity, could lead someone to believe that all the people in this church have the same views.

The individuals asking this question specifically wanted to know if all the people in this church have the same political views. I shared that even though some people make the assumption that all of us in this church have the same political views; that is not the case. There are people in this church who belong to different political parties and others who identify as "Independent." Our political beliefs run the spectrum.

This conversation that I had with new people to the church came to mind as I reflected on today's sermon topic: "Embrace Diversity." If the church, which is all of us, is to embrace diversity, we must first recognize that diversity exists. Our differing political views are just one example of the diversity found in this congregation.

If you look up the word "embrace" in the dictionary you will find that it can mean to accept and support. It can also mean to welcome with open arms. Diversity refers to something that is composed of differing elements, or variety.

Embracing diversity therefore refers to the inclusion of different types of people in a group or organization.

This morning's reading from Mark illustrates a type of diversity found among religious folk...theological beliefs. When Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" they respond with a variety of answers, including John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. When Jesus asks the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers, "You are the Messiah."

In the same way that people had different understandings of who Jesus was at that time, people in this church have different understandings of who Jesus is today. These different understandings reflect the fact that within this church there are a variety of theological beliefs. There are people whose faith could be labeled orthodox, some identify as evangelical or Pentecostal, some mainline, others progressive or liberal, and, I have it by good authority that others yet describe themselves as heretics!

One of the wonderful things about being part of a church where people are free to discuss their different theological understandings is that we can learn from one another. The Reverend Kate Matthews, in reflecting on today's reading from Mark, expresses the power of hearing different voices. She writes, "Every way we turn in the life of the church, we seem to hear the question of 'who Jesus is.' More conservative voices seem to have a clear and compelling answer about Jesus' identity and the requirement, first, to accept him as our Lord and Savior, and, second, to convince others to do the same. More progressive voices seem to strive to explore the mystery of who Jesus was and who Jesus is in our lives today; they also seem to focus on Jesus' actions in order to understand his identity."

Reverend Matthews goes on to ask,

"Do you find a clear answer more compelling than a mystery? Both have their power in our lives, and perhaps we need both: clear answers and an appreciation of mystery."

Embracing diversity is not the same thing as adopting the beliefs of other people. It means creating an environment where people, with a variety of beliefs, can come together to explore their faith.

In order for this to happen the church must maintain a safe environment for everyone. We find some good advice on how to do this in our reading from the

letter of James. In this letter the author speaks at length about the tongue. He writes, “With it we bless God and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.” (James 3:9-10)

When I read these words it occurs to me that things haven’t changed a great deal in the last two thousand years. Throughout history we humans have been quick to use our tongues to hurt those individuals we disagree with.

It is important to remember that every person comes to any discussion with their own narrative. That is, every one of us has a personal history that has shaped our lives and our beliefs. It is important to take the time to learn more about the narrative of other people. To embrace diversity involves silencing our tongue long enough to hear what other people have to share.

It is also important to reflect on the experiences that have shaped our lives and how they influence our thoughts about other people. If you have a negative feeling towards another person, ask yourself why? It may have more to do with your past, than with the person you are speaking to.

As I stated at the beginning of this sermon, the people in this church have different opinions about many things. When we find ourselves in disagreement with another person it is tempting to immediately go into a rebuttal. We would do well to discuss ways in which we can come together for the common good.

James reminds us that in the same way that the tongue can be used to curse others, it can also be used to bless others. To embrace diversity is to offer loving support to one another as we make this journey known as life.

In a conversation that I had with another individual who has recently started attending this church I was told that when she visited other churches she was surprised that very few people acknowledged her as a visitor. This individual wasn’t critical of those people because she knows that when people come to church they want to visit with their friends. It was, however, disconcerting to not have anyone extend a welcome.

This individual then went on to say that she did not have this experience when visiting this church. People very graciously introduced themselves to her and welcomed her to the church. For that I am pleased.

Embracing diversity isn’t always easy. Our fears, our prejudices, and our misunderstandings all play into our interactions with other people. Having said

that, there is so much to be gained from such interactions. I encourage all of us to not only reach out to welcome visitors but also to befriend someone in the church we don't know. As you look around this sanctuary who might you reach out to? How might you engage in conversation? What might you learn about that person, and yourself? When you are doing that, know that you are being The Church.