

Rev. Holly Vincent Been
Sermon: Seattle First Baptist Church, July 9, 2017

Thank you, Craig, for your kind introduction.

And hello, Seattle First Baptist! It is a real honor to join you in worship this morning on this American Baptist Sunday. My heartfelt thanks to The Rev. Tim Phillips and to Craig Darling, longtime friends, for their invitation to be here and their truly warm welcome.

As we enter together into this time of reflection, let us invite God's spirit to guide our hearts and minds. Amen.

We are one in the Spirit

We are one in the Lord

We are one in the Spirit

We are one in the Lord,

And I pray that our unity will one day be restored,

And they'll know we are Christians by our love. . .

While attending the recent Biennial Mission Summit with fellow American Baptists—including some folks here—this old hymn was one of the few that I (a) recognized or (b) thought I could sing. Most of the other songs—and there were many—left me standing awkwardly trying to mouth the words and catch the tune. I was out of my comfort zone many times while others were singing fervently, prayerfully, apparently fully familiar with the song and right at home with the kind of piety it expressed. When American Baptist gather from across our wide denominational spectrum, this disconnect is not unusual. Others in attendance may be discomforted by one liturgical choice or another, from not enough of this to too much of that. The disconnects are not only liturgical. The Rev. Corey Fields, an ABC pastor, writing about the Mission Summit online, pointed out that though the large gatherings made our diversity look good, the smaller settings brought out some very painful feelings. He cited feelings of exclusion, rejection, prejudice and alienation.

Being, and remaining, American Baptist is not always easy. My sermon this morning will reflect on both the discomfort and the promise it holds.

Denominational life may not be the most exciting topic, I'll admit.

Denominations seem remote in our daily lives. Those of us who have walked the denominational walk—like my friend and former colleague Patricia Hunter—can recall endless meetings and messy politics and may prefer to change the subject. Some question whether denominations still have a role in religious life. Some predict their demise. If we are living in post-denominational times, I hope that is not just because we wish to avoid denominational discomfort. The tensions and the awkwardness we experience have something to teach us.

My home church is Judson Memorial Church in New York's Greenwich Village. And I bring you greetings from Judson! Judson is affiliated with two denominations—the American Baptist Churches (ABC) and the United Church of Christ (UCC). In the past, Judson kept a critical distance from both, though its roots are American Baptist. (We proudly tell people that Edward Judson, son of Adoniram Judson, was our founder.) I was a longtime American Baptist denominational worker, and I have felt the tension of serving a larger church that was not always in good graces with my home church's values, or mine for that matter. Even now Judson's progressive values incline it towards its UCC kin. The ABC folks in the congregation, like me, get a bit hoarse trying to remind everyone of the importance of our Baptist roots and principles. Perhaps here at Seattle First Baptist Church, your progressive values might also create some distance from mainstream American Baptist life. So shall we dismiss denominational life as irrelevant? Why seek to reconcile with an American Baptist reality that feels alien and, perhaps, potentially hostile?

The question deserves our attention because of why we have been together in the first place, embedded in our Baptist roots and branches. Those roots go deep in the Biblical promise of God's call.

Our Christian tradition reaches all the way back to the foundational call and promise given to Abram. It offered hope of a future as a people, a community, the beloved community. To respond to God's call, however, Abram had to leave his

home and his kin. He had to go to a new land, one that God had not even named for him. Aren't we, too, asked to step out on faith, to leave what is familiar, trusting in God's guidance and provision? Aren't we, too, asked to leave behind old notions of family and tribe in order to be the people God calls us to be, the beloved community? I believe we are, day after day.

Instead of the nomadic wanderings of our ancient forebears, we take journeys of mind and heart, out of comfortable mental pathways and reassuring realities. I recently read a thoughtful little book called "The Trouble with Reality", written by Brooke Gladstone (of NPR fame). She claims that each of us lives within a carefully constructed personal world— not one of facts alone. She says, "Reality is what forms after we filter, arrange, and prioritize . . . facts and marinate them in our values and traditions." (p.2) She says that what each of us considers reality is an *umwelt*, that is, the world as it is experienced. *Umwelt* contrasts with the actual world, the one not filtered through values, traditions and priorities. She shows how we humans are biologically programmed in this way to maintain equilibrium. The *umwelt* is shaped to fit and protect us, psychically, from chaos. However, as she quotes (and I paraphrase) Schopenhauer, "Every one takes the limits of her or his own field of vision for the limits of the world." (p.8)

The subtitle of Gladstone's book is "A Ruminant on the Moral Panic in Our Time". Panic? Well, who among us hasn't felt a certain panic in the last 8 months or so? We have been jolted by a reality we did not expect to face in our country. Gladstone says we will and do inevitably encounter other realities, facts and experiences that destabilize the *umwelt*. She writes, ". . .the result is always a deep and strange unease, which can be escaped only by modifying one's previous opinion." (p.13) The modification reshapes our *umwelt* to take new information into account but this does not happen easily. We are programmed to adjust only to the extent necessary. Gladstone says, "to do otherwise would both deny you serenity and defy your biochemistry. It's behavior bred in the bone, and the blood, and the brain." (p. 14)

Gladstone's ideas reflect my church experience, especially at the denominational level. Perhaps that rings true for you, too. We form a web,

sometimes a very comfortable one, of what our church—or our denomination—ought to be and then are thrown when something comes along that does not fit. Hasn't it ever been thus? Remember that old joke about the seven last words of the church? 'We've never done it that way before.' I believe that being Baptist, (and one reason I have chosen and continue to affirm my Baptist bonds) is the value we Baptist place on going to 'a new land.' It may mean joining a gathering where I predict I will not feel at home. It may mean accepting an invitation to walk a new landscape of mind and heart with few assurances of what I will find there. In my experience, accepting these invitations have led to promising glimpses of a beloved community through Baptist people, Baptist principles and Baptist practice.

First, the people. I am inspired and encouraged by so many people I have met through the American Baptists. Many of them are here--or have been here--in this room. I am sure you can think of a great many here at Seattle First Baptist, your saints. I'd like to tell you about an American Baptist that gave me one of those glimpses.

In the early 1990's, my work for the ABC pension board, MMBB, took Craig Darling and me to an ABC conference in Green Lake, Wisconsin. We were there to present a workshop on pastoral care for persons living with AIDS, something Craig had developed and presented for several years already with MMBB. (And, as an important aside, those AIDS seminars were one of the reasons Craig found his way to this church and the founding of Companis!) At Green Lake we met a quiet and unassuming minister from Kansas who was serving as Chaplain for Ottawa University, an ABC college. This chaplain wanted very much for us to present our workshop for the Ottawa students. Craig and I were not optimistic about how the presentation would be received; after all, weren't *all* Kansans super conservative Christians who flatly rejected *anything* to do with the gay community? In spite of misgivings, we accepted the invitation and were surprised and pleased at the welcome we received. We got to know the chaplain and we learned that, years earlier he had heard Howard Moody—Judson Church's Senior Minister at the time—speak at an ABC gathering and had followed Howard's ministry with interest ever since. He was eager to know more about Judson Church; he was concerned about

the AIDS crisis and wanted to do something about it. We learned that he had a son living in New York who might attend Judson. As I got to know this man better, he ceased to be a Baptist from Bible belt Kansas. He became the Reverend John Blythe. I learned that he was (and is) a man who lived his faith in many inspiring ways. And he did help his son find a church home at Judson. Our dear friend David Blythe, uncle of Seattle First Baptist's Susan Goodman, has been a beloved member of Judson for many years now.

And so I learned not to believe the hype about Baptists. I learned that Baptists defy labels and the best way to know Baptist life is to get to know Baptist people, even if you can't easily find common ground. I am grateful for this and I hope you are, too. Baptist people come together under this very wide tent because ultimately they, we, belong to God. We live continually with the discomfort of not fitting neatly together, since conformity is not our strong suit. However, God has given us not only each other but some ways and some wisdom to help us to be together.

Baptist principles seek to express this wisdom. For one thing, in our very wide tent, there is freedom. A prominent Baptist voice, Walter B. Shurden, writes, ". . . I am convinced that the one word that comes closer than any other to capturing the historic Baptist identity is the word 'freedom.' This is a strange assertion at a time when many view Baptists as narrow, provincial, and even reactionary." This passion for freedom is rooted in an understanding of the gospel that emerged from the left wing of the Protestant Reformation. It has been shaped by centuries of testing, even persecution. Freedom, in Baptist life, is cherished not only as freedom *from* but also freedom *for*, and it reflects and honors the mysterious freedom of God.

Walter Shurden also claims, "The Baptist passion for freedom is a major reason why there is so much diversity in Baptist life." Our denominational diversity is said to be a gift, albeit a bewildering one. You probably know that the ABC is one of the few denominations that has no racial or ethnic majority. That seems promising. And you probably know that American Baptists rarely speak with one voice on many matters including some crucial social justice concerns like the inclusion of LGBTQ persons. This is not so promising; it can be very distressing for

those of us who feel deeply committed to progressive values and want our denomination to reflect that.

And when it doesn't, we seem to reach an impasse. What to do?

What have Baptists done? I am grateful—as I always seem to be—to The Rev. Dr. Molly T. Marshall for her article in Baptist News Global describing her church's process of considering becoming Welcoming and Affirming. She described how the church educated itself, studied Scripture and listened carefully to many voices in many ways. And Molly observed: "Unity in the Body of Christ has never come easy, and more often than not, churches fracture when conflict arises. A longstanding myth is that members of congregations have to agree on every issue to stay together." Indeed, one Baptist practice that I believe is all too common is for Baptist groups to separate when conflict comes. And yet, as Molly asks, "When does conscience require one to 'shake the dust' and move on?"

Another helpful Baptist voice, that of Rev. Joe DeRoulhac offered insight into the covenantal commitments that bring and keep Baptists together. At the Mission Summit session Joe led he distinguished covenanting with contracts and other, more conventional, commitments. Here are his words: "The focus of covenants is on the worth of others. This focus frees us from a preoccupation with what we think, feel, and want, and directs our energy and resources to honoring the deepest value of others. We, thereby, become a healing presence in our world instead of breaking the world into more pieces by insisting on our way."

I have known individual Baptists to come together deliberately because of their differences to talk them through, to look for common ground, and to intentionally stay in relationship in spite of the hard work and pain of differing. These people take diversity seriously, as a corollary to their freedom, and they protect their relationships, their covenantal relationships, the ones that, in Joe's words, "beckon us beyond ourselves to the fullness of all God has created."

So as I say this, I am keenly aware that I speak from my first world, white, straight privileged perspective. My thoughts and urgings may not have much value for those whose lives have been dismissed and despised. We know that we have, we

do and we will fail to live up to love's requirements. We need to be able to give and receive forgiveness, in profound and consistent ways.

Finding forgiveness from the burden of the harm done to someone else is liberating, freeing. Forgiving someone else for the harm done to us also frees us. We may wish to find a permanently restored state of blessedness, but, as long as we live in the human family, we live within the ebb and flow of brokenness and repair.

Forgiveness is the spiritual practice that adjusts our realities, our *umwelt*. Attending a big denominational gathering, as I have just done, forces me to admit that the faces around me too easily mirror my own preoccupations. When I misunderstand what is true for you—what you really mean to say or be—our relationship suffers. Here in our community of faith, relationships—real life, face-to-face relationships—are our bedrock, our foundation. Through the practice of forgiveness—asking for it, receiving it, giving it—we experience God's grace and the promise of restored relationships.

When we honor the principle of soul freedom, the belief that each of us has unmediated experience of the divine, then we must respect the holiness within each person. Each person can reflect God's glory. How, then, can we not try to reconcile with each other? In its simplest terms, our task as Christians is to practice what we preach--in this troubled time and with these (sometimes difficult) people.

Desmond Tutu tells us, "When we forgive, we reclaim the power to create. We can create a new relationship with the person who has injured us . . . a new story of ourselves." We believe in redemption through Christ, let us recognize that our work, then, is reconciliation. Perhaps, in our search for reconciliation a new wholeness will be realized in ways that we cannot determine or foresee. And then, may we know, again, and anew, the love that lifts us up and will not let us go.

So we follow Abram's call to leave the familiar, the family and tribe we know, to step out on faith and form a new kind of community, the beloved community. Be glad for the width of our Baptist tent. We all have a place and a role to play in it. Perhaps we will become a beloved community. Be brave and hopeful, for God has promised to show us the way. We are not, after all, doing this on our own. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Holly Vincent Bean
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