

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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A Strange Equality
Psalm 133.1-3; John 17.20-26
Russ Dean, May 2, 2010



They say we're all the same. All of us. Men and women. Rich and poor. American and Cuban and Afghan. Black and white and young and old. All the same. The differences (what differences?) are only superficial. Race, for example, is not real. Cannot be defined, genetically. If you can roll your tongue, you are more genetically similar to an Asian or African American who can do so, than to someone of your same so-called "race," who cannot. We are all one. And the strangeness of our oneness, the insignificance of our difference, does not stop there.

They say we're all the same. You and me... and Mickey Mouse. Yes, apparently on a "letter by letter basis," comparing the genetic code laid out on the DNA of humans and our cousin, the friendly rodent, we're 85% identical. We even carry a gene for growing a tail like little Mickey. Thankfully, somewhere over the last 75 million years, we misplaced the genetic instructions for doing so!¹ Since I've mentioned DNA, you might be interested in knowing that while you and your parents share 99.5% of yours, you also share 98% with the chimpanzees up in the Asheboro zoo... and 60% with a fruit fly... and 50% with a banana!² Besides confirming for me that most of you are half-"bananas" – it also reminds us of our strange connectedness to all the living stuff that's out there.

And if you dig even deeper there's a connection with the non-living stuff, too. Dig far enough into our component parts, and at the heart of our cells lie the atoms of the universe. If you could see on an atomic level, you wouldn't see men and women, or whites and blacks, and

¹ Reported by Sabin Russell of the San Francisco Chronicle, "Of Mice and Men," December 5, 2002. I located the article online at: http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-12-05/news/17575344_1_human-genome-eric-lander-director-mouse-genes.

² <http://www.thingsyoudontneedtoknow.com/dnabananas.html>

certainly not democrats or republicans or socialists or capitalists, not even human beings or bats or bananas or basalt – what you’d see is clusters of carbon and calcium and oxygen and the hydrogen that powered the expansion of the universe. And you might not easily distinguish the cluster that you’ve come to appreciate as yourself, from that banana or basalt – or even a star in a distant galaxy.

And the strangest thing, yet – if you could see even smaller than that – is that you’d find that all of that stuff, the components of the hydrogen and the carbon, are really just energy, pulsing to the beat of some distant drummer. The bizarre, but real findings of the quantum discoveries, is that matter and energy, the stuff and the sizzle... are really all the same. Energy and matter are completely exchangeable – in reality there is no difference at all.³

So you have to wonder if the Mystery of this universe, the Intelligence through it all, looks across this vast experiment of “*let there be*” (Genesis 1) and sees you and me, with our superficial differences, or whether God just sees an infinite palate of indistinguishable energy and potential and life, and smiles and says, “*It is good!*” (Genesis 1)

All I’m trying to say folks, in my quirky-quantum way, is that the differences that divide us, large as they seem to be at the human level, are actually so miniscule, compared to the essence that connects us, the essential goodness brings us into relationship with everything in the universe – the differences are so meaningless that we ought to be ashamed that when we look across our world, “difference” is all we can see.

³ It’s wonderful to have brilliant people in your congregation, people who are much smarter, and more well-read than you. It’s also a little daunting. After the sermon Sunday, our resident university mathematics professor (who has probably also read more theology than I have!) corrected my lesson in quantum physics. “It’s relativity (Einstein’s discovery) that says matter and energy are interchangeable – the findings of quantum physics suggests that matter and energy, at the smallest component level, come in discrete ‘packets,’ or ‘quanta.’” Thanks, Tom. I hate to have misguided people on the finer points of the physical properties of the quantum world!

While Jesus didn't know $e=mc^2$, he did know that his disciples, and their 21st century counterparts, could only see skin-deep, so as he anticipated his departure from them he prayed a prayer that we may need even more than they did: *That they may all be one*. For despite our makeup – I need not tell you – we are not.

We have a history (literally, the whole of human history) that shows how prone we are to divide ourselves by inconsequential differences. I wonder how long it took Adam to say to Eve, “You throw like a girl?” And do you think Adam ever stopped to ask directions as he led them out of that Garden, East of Eden? Someone has called sexism our original sin – though we are *bone of bone* and *flesh of flesh* (Genesis 2.23). And very soon these original parents were dealing with the death of a child, and the double grief that it caused, coming as it did, at the hands of another. The Broadway show, Oklahoma sings the essential difference between Cain and Abel, “Yes, the farmer and the cowboy should be friends!” But they never have been. And the mark of Cain, given by God for protection quickly came to be seen, by a near-sighted society, as a mark of shame. And human beings have used the differences in and on our skin as one of the clearest, most divisive of all distinctions, ever since. (How foolish... even within dark-skinned people groups, racism is evident between the lighter-skinned and the darker-skinned within the group.) And then, as God divided a people with one language, lest they become too powerful (this, according to the tale of Babel), divided them into a generation of nations, the divisions of language and culture and religion became wedges of infinite degree.

As he had told his disciples earlier, Jesus knew that some of our demons could only be exorcised through prayer (Mark 9.29). So as he was to depart, he did all he could do for us. Not chastise or belittle... not teach or exhort... not challenge or inspire.... He had given his life to

these. Knowing the challenge facing us... Knowing he would not be with us, to walk hand-in-hand... But not willing to forget us... Jesus prayed for us.

Today, in earnest, we begin “Redreaming the Dream.” Our 2010 Vision Team has been working for several months to prepare for this first church-wide process, preparing for a season of asking and listening of probing and reflecting and seeking. And surely we will need Jesus to pray for us as we do so. We are in a time of great transition. Phyllis Tickle, in her book, *The Great Emergence*, identifies it as the great tumult of a 500-year cycle in the life of the Church, when the Church cleans out its attic, hosts a kind of yard sale as it senses a new day, and seeks a new way. I am feeling that Emergence all around. Reading of it by authors across the theological spectrum. We have felt it in economic tremors. We’re feeling it in the winds of political discontent. She says these are always part of the cycle. One American party came to unprecedented power as a result of this discontent, and we’re now living in the aftershocks of an expected reaction. In such a day extremists at either edge dominate the atmosphere. Maybe Jesus’ prayer will just help us hold it together until cooler heads, and more seasonable weather, prevails. In Cuba a growing, popular unrest resonates with, and contributes to, the change that is in the air all around our globe.⁴

And at Park Road Baptist Church, as we celebrate 60 years of worship and service on this corner, that change is rumbling. Can’t you feel it? The leaders who made this church what it is today are moving to the margins, and slowly, but too quickly, we’re celebrating the lives they gave to this special place. And as these “mighty oaks” give ground to the acorns that have grown

⁴ I was in Cuba last week participating in an annual exchange with a sister church in Carlos Rojas. The pastor of that church, and other church leaders, spoke of the a growing, popular unrest with the government, which is now in the hands of Raul Castro.

in the shade of their strength, there is the expected anxiety.⁵ You who built this church over the last 60 years, we need your wisdom as we enter this process. We need to know the pitfalls you encountered, the pain you endured, the vision which guided you. We need your wisdom – but we need you to offer it to us, with the grace and vision with which it was offered to you. For, just as it was in 1950, when this church was founded with an unusual, but historically Baptist sense of openness (initially, to divorced persons and to a handicapped community)... And just as it was in the year of my birth when some in this daring church marched for Racial Equality in New York City, and when, five years later, you opened the first interracial church-sponsored daycare in this city... And just as it was when you began to affirm and acceptant gays and lesbians on this campus, way back in 1974... And just as it was when you marched in favor of reducing the nation's stockpiles of nuclear weapons... And just as it was when you stepped out on a limb and hired a young, un-experienced couple to become your pastors... Just as it was... So it is.

Some are pushing. And some are holding back. Some are eager. Some are afraid. Some will see a vision. Some will not be able to see beyond their own prejudices or their own pain. Some will lead. Some will follow. Some will be clueless. And some will stand in the way.

Just as it was... So it is...

I believe a new day is dawning for Park Road Baptist Church. And I am invigorated by the excitement and the anxiety of it. Who we will become? Where we will go? What we will look like tomorrow? It's time, I think she said, *to cast our net on the other side of the boat*.⁶ She didn't say we needed to look for a new lake. Nor taking up hunting. Nor learn to sharecrop. Just cast, on the other side.

⁵ In last week's memorial service for Al Wilson, I quoted Wendy Watson, who was raised in/by this church, who had called Al a great "oak" of our church.

⁶ This text is from John 21.6, and in her sermon last week, Amy Jacks Dean had encouraged the congregation to do just that.

We're Redreaming the Dream – not starting from a blank, “*tabula rosa*.” We will be true to Park Road Baptist Church’s heritage as a Christian community of faith. Faith in God that we have come to know in and through Jesus Christ. Seeking wisdom from the biblical witness will not change; we will educate our children in the Story of Jesus. Christian practices, which we share with a diverse family of believers all over the world, will remain central: song and silence, praise and prayer, proclamation of the Good Word, and response to it. Holding kinship in that broad family of faith, however, we will also be true to this church’s particular, historic concern for honesty in theology (becoming, not having⁷), integrity in worship, relevance in mission, warmth in fellowship, depth in generosity, length and breadth in vision.

I believe a new day is dawning for Park Road Baptist Church. No – tomorrow will not look like today. But neither did it in 1999. Or 1982. Or 1976. Or 1964. Or 1950.⁸ Thanks be to God.

So as we leave this room today, bound for a first conversation, a first glimpse at that tomorrow, I do hope Jesus is still praying. We probably need to join him. Because we will not be able to make ourselves one⁹ – the differences (ironic as they are) are just too many. Here, as all around this strangely connected, sadly disconnected world, the only hope is that we learn to work together in love. For where there is love the “haves” give to the “have-nots” – and find that in giving, they receive the most! The wise give to the immature – and recognize that they have

⁷ The church’s iconic founding pastor, Charlie Milford made famous this saying, “Truth is a becoming, not a having.”

⁸ These are the dates of the events that I detailed in the preceding paragraphs.

⁹ The words to the opening meditation in our bulletin were from Sarah Dylan Breuer: “We forget... that the words of this Sunday’s gospel come not as marching orders delivered by Jesus to disciples, but as a prayer of Jesus to the Father. In other words, the unity – the communion – that we share is God’s gift. Jesus asks God to grant it, not us to create it. If we doubt our own abilities to achieve unity with one another in Christ – and well we should – we can be confident that God will answer Jesus’ prayer. Unity in Christ is not a medal to be won, nor is it a negotiated settlement achieved by some at the expense of others. It is a gift flowing freely to and through us out of God’s grace.” (<http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary>)

become the real students. Those who cling to what is theirs, find they cannot keep it – and those who give their lives away find the amazing abundance of life (cf. Matthew 16 and John 10).

Love creates A Strange Equality. And that Strange Equality is our tomorrow.

May it be so -- today!