

## THE NEXT DIVERSITY

Texts on Sunday, October 2, 2011

*Genesis 12: 1-3; Luke 14: 12-24*

A small church I once pastored had a breakthrough from friendliness to spiritual community; from liking those who were like themselves to loving and learning with people unlike themselves. “They” changed. The unlikeness they broke through on was sexual orientation, and their discovery transformed *them* into a *we* graced with surprising new energies. Eventually of course, transformations become formations; the new becomes the norm of identity. A few years into that process in that church up north, I asked them this. *Since some, once feared here, are now friends; since we have progressed some way, and so are progressive in some way, what is next for this progressing church? What is the next step, the next diversity?*

Now, Riverside Church, you are diverse. But a progressive church cannot simply proclaim progress in diversity—international, interdenominational, interracial. No, the church of Christ must pray for its progress. Let us always use the humble word “becoming” before these noble ideals: *becoming* international, becoming interracial and so forth. ♪ *Lord, I want to be... come multicultural in-a my heart.* But what is diversity?

The word *diverse* is cousin to *divert*. The root means “to turn aside.” To become diverse is to practice turning aside from the present path. It’s what the good Samaritan does in Jesus’ famous story. He diverts his attention from his customary concerns and turns aside to cross the road to the beaten stranger. Diversity is what a growing tree does; a tiny burst of life turns aside from the trunk, not once, but a thousand times. The confounding wonder about seeking diversity—“turn-aside-ity”—is, once you start in praying for it, you can’t stop. You can rest, but you can’t stop, lest the new path you made become the wide and the easy way, demanding no more than a howdy, no more seeking the mind of Christ, no more discipline, no more disciples.

Jesus always demanded the discipline of diversity from his disciples. More than words, his teaching aid was a table of food and fellowship. His invitation was to any and to all to come together at table and eat. He got specific. *Do not invite your friends and family to your feasts. Instead, he said, Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.* Two questions: Why them? And, about 100,000 Sundays into the game, How are we doing?

Churchy answers to these questions are that Jesus wants us to share with those less fortunate than ourselves, but we’re not good at this, because we’re sinners. These are appalling distortions of the gospel. That easy little prick—“I’m a sinner”—just vaccinates us against getting full-blown faith in

Christ. Real faith is eager to put on Christ. Real faith sees that the attitude of charity to the unfortunate enforces separation of the powerful from the poor. Proudly given gifts grease the gears of privilege that grind fear and hopelessness from the oppressed like oil from olive stones. The reason Jesus wants his disciples in the company of the poor, the crippled, and the blind is not to become their champions and their heroes, not even to heal them—but because those dislodged and disabled and diverted from the paths of ordinary abilities see and reveal “thy kingdom come” better than do the eyes and the comforts of sleek and conventional bodies.

Remember this sad story from the table of the “Holiness code” in Leviticus 21:18ff. “For no one who has a blemish shall draw near [to the sanctuary], or one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or . . . ” This is “the word of God for the people of God”? It is easy to say that we don’t anymore believe that those with disabilities hold God’s punishment in their flesh. But though the god be gone who was supposed to demand such distance from the disabled, we haven’t dropped the command. Distance from the disabled is still our law.

A member of Riverside said to me recently, “This building is not accessible for a person who can’t walk well. Did you know that?” I did not know that, and I could not figure out her point. We have good elevators and I was certain she knew that the Claremont Street doors swing open at the push of a button. My puzzled face prompted her to walk my mind’s eye to the problem. “It’s the inner doors, just inside the electric doors! If they’re closed, you just have to wait there until someone comes along.” I was shocked to see this—not so much by Riverside’s unfinished business, but by my own blindness; by the blunt fact that I had not once noticed; had not once felt the doors as a wall, though I had no doubt held that wall open for someone wielding a walker. Distance from disability is still the law in our members.

It’s easy to throw up defenses to explain our ignorance of these and other walls that hem in those with disabilities and close down their possibilities. “It’s not intentional,” we might say. “We’re just busy with our concerns.” But such exculpations carry no water. The whole question of transforming human relations—Jesus’ main theme—is exactly about diversifying our attention, so that what has been unintentional ignorance become intentional awareness—in a word, so that “we” become greater, inwardly and outwardly, as we break down walls of hostility and inaccessibility and oppression.

In saying that distance from disability is still the inner law of the conventionally abled, I refer to a law of fear in our bodily members. We are wired to want no exposure to facts that make us face our frailty. Anciently, we screwed our wiring into liturgies and laws. Jesus was breaking those laws all the time, making it possible for his disciples to uncoil from their animal fears and emerge from that stiff cocoon into the freedom of intention to love the stranger, the other. Now, we know these things here in our heads. The question of the next diversity is, What practices are we willing to try, to teach our bodies and our hearts and our whole selves to live in the love we claim? Jesus says, *Get to the table with them whom you most fear; and sit and eat.*

But how are “we” going to sit down with “them”—and even stop being “we-and-them”—if we don’t dare see them; if they are walled out by closed doors, rigid customs, and fears we hardly know how to bring from the shadows to the light? To accomplish this, the first necessary discipline of disciples is dialogue. If, for example, a sermon that moved you never moves your tongue to your own speech, then it was just entertainment, hardly different from a good movie. This is why small groups are at the heart of healthy congregations. This is why an opportunity for “sermon talk-back” is essential, if the word of the Lord shall not return empty from a congregation.

Carl Jung offers more light to the blind on this subject:

“Recognition of the shadow leads to the modesty we need to acknowledge imperfection. And it is just this risk of conscious recognition that is needed wherever a human relationship is to be established. A human relationship is not based on differentiation and perfection, for these only emphasize differences . . . It is based rather on imperfection, on what is weak, helpless, and in need of support—the very ground and motive for dependence. The perfect have no need of others, but weakness has. It is from need and distress that new forms of existence arise.” (*The Undiscovered Self*, p. 116)

New forms of existence are the next diversity, whose source is awareness of need and distress. This is why Jesus wants us in the company of the disabled. And in the company of those who are sick or poor or hungry or in prison or prostitution or coming from those prisons. Partly, to be sure, so that we who are full now take part in the good news of their release from the cages of oppression that corrode the dignity and joy of living. But equally, so that we see our fear and obsessive wish to be spared the indignity of loss; and then, feel, by grace, the courage to turn from worn paths to the next diversity.

Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche, that network of homes where people with developmental disabilities live in community with others, sketches out the actual process of inner development and healing experienced by the conventionally abled who come to the table with the disabled:

“Disabled people are humanity’s privileged witnesses. They can teach everyone about the love that saves us; they can become heralds of a new world, no longer dominated by force, violence, and aggression . . . but transfigured by the light of Christ. We discover more and more that those who are rejected by society because of their weakness . . . are in fact a presence of God. If we welcome them, they lead us progressively out of the . . . need to do great things toward a world of communion of hearts, a life that is simple and joyful where we do small things with love.”

We need to see that every earthly system of evil, from terrorism to the death penalty to the ruins of war to the rack of economic exploitation, depends for leverage on the fear in our bodies of which we are unconscious. But when a person grows in conscious recognition of her own frailty and dependence, when the heart begins to break open in compassion for the immense yearning of all souls for meaning in their being, then the complex wiring of fear frays and breaks down and ceases to channel electric energies of resistance and fear into the emotions and the body. Jesus sends us to the table with people who have already met their fear in the frank disablements of their bodies and their lives. If we go to that table with open minds and hearts and hands, the whole scheme of oppression opens to deconstruction and, in due season, destruction.

Perhaps we are seeing it in the risks taken by the economically disabled youth now occupying Wall Street—and the city jails. In Howard Zinn’s words:

The essential ingredients of [all] struggles for justice are human beings who, if only for a moment, even though beset with fears, step out of line and do *something*, however small. Even the smallest, most unheroic of acts adds to the store of kindling that may be ignited by some surprising circumstances into tumultuous change.

Friends, Riverside will never be perfect, and therefore never perfectly ready for what is coming. No people ever are. For the sake of all the families of the earth, whom we would bless and be blessed by, let us come to the table of fellowship with the stranger. Let us come all together imperfectly into the next diversity.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

*The Riverside Church  
in the City of New York*

© 2011 Stephen H. Phelps