

“Getting Along in Church”

(“Disunity in Church” by Christena Cleveland, c. 2013)

1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 27

West Swamp Mennonite Church # 30

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In my former church there were two women who did not get along. Oh, they could be nice to each other and the rest of the church probably never knew they did not get along—but I knew it. As worship minister, I oversaw music and heard about the tension between them regularly. Mary and Diane (not really their names) might have both had musical gifts and attended the same church but they operated in two completely different worlds.

Mary was prim and proper and always on time. She liked things planned ahead, and enjoyed the more cultured end of the music spectrum. She liked the classics like Beethoven and Bach and more meditative pieces like those from the monastic tradition. She liked fancy quartets and those ancient and time-honored hymns.

Diane was everything the opposite. She was a bit sloppy and always late. She slept in until ten o'clock most mornings so was always rushing into church on Sunday mornings pulling her things together at the last minute. She liked to do things spontaneously and adored praise music. She was always advertising an upcoming drama she was going to do at church but never seemed to know exactly how it was going to work out and sign-up sheets were last minute but somehow is always came together.

Both had a deep faith, loved our church and were gifted musicians. The real question was: how could they learn to get along for Jesus' sake?

In our book for this week entitled "Disunity in Christ", Christena Cleveland says, "Discipleship is cross-cultural work." In her mind the more we worship and serve with folks who are different from us (like Mary & Diane), the more we can learn from each other and grow more like Christ.

On the other hand, she thinks the more we meet Jesus around people who are just like us, over time we stifle our growth and open ourselves up to all kinds of division. Cleveland believes variety is the spice of a wholesome church. She says overcoming our differences and working through conflict are keys to growth toward unity in Christ.

But she admits it is hard work and there is a lot going against us, including our very nature as human beings. Cleveland, an African American social psychologist, says it is natural for us to want to clump together with those just like us and thus to keep others who are different at bay. She says it is natural for us to gather with similar people and then develop prejudices, inaccurate perceptions, even hostilities against those not in our group. We do all this of course to help ourselves feel better, to make ourselves more "right" , and much safer than we are on our own.

To save some mental energy, Cleveland says it is also natural for us to categorize folks into different boxes, to create stereotypes or labels, and generally to think more negative about them. And remember, I am not

talking about people and groups outside the church, today we are talking about believers and groups within the larger body of Christ – people and groups who have forgotten their common heritage under God and their unity in his Son, Jesus Christ.

We have some reasons, besides making ourselves feel better, for steering clear of different kinds of believers or running up against a Mary or Diane and saying bad things about them. For one thing we hate ambiguity. We want easy answers and certainty about things and people. We do not like black sheep in our own groups and certainly cannot dare to see those other people or groups like us.

To join all different kinds of people or groups together into one bunch – well, where would that lead us except down that slippery slope that will certainly land us at the doorstep of hell. A Mary and a Diane trying to do congregational music, Catholic and Mennonite church groups serving together or Lutheran and Baptist denominations sharing communion together would certainly mean a mess for us all – one of them has to go we might say.

Cleveland thinks otherwise and she uses our scripture today to prove her point. She says, “The brilliant and challenging metaphor of the body of Christ preaches the need to engage in cross-cultural relationships because other groups are our lifelines. If each of our church groups represents one part of the body(such as the hand, the eye or ear) it follows that we need to

remain connected to each other in order to receive the information and nourishment required for survival. “

Throughout the book, Cleveland gives us numerous suggestions that can help different people like Mary and Diane come together as well as different church groups needing to see their larger identity as children of God united in Jesus.

She says we need to share some experiences together: We all need to go on a bus trip, or a SWAP service trip together. We need to work on a community project or committee together or share together in a community worship service. We need to stop using we/them language and start using we/us language. We need to confront inaccurate perceptions of each other and make their problems our problems and their joys our joys. We need to look for ways we are similar instead of showcasing how we are different.

We need to practice placing ourselves in their shoes, listen to their stories, and make ourselves vulnerable at the same time. We need to make self-affirming statements about ourselves and the other as children of God and remind ourselves we really do need each other. We need to hear and see the good in those with diverse points and forge a common identity as followers of Christ. Remember, discipleship is cross-cultural work and you do not need to leave our church or Quakertown to do it.

Cleveland says the key to true unity in the Church is to care for and pursue other followers of Christ, even those we do not instinctively value or

like, and to allow our identity as members of the body of Christ to trump all other identities. She reminds us “Jesus is serious about crossing boundaries to pursue each one of us, but he is also equally serious about our crossing boundaries to pursue others”.

I am glad to report Mary and Diane are still making music at church. I am glad to see some of us stretching ourselves to know the Lutherans, Catholics, and Baptists in our community, and I am grateful our Mennonite communion table is a lot more open than it used to be. May this congregation continue the hard cross-cultural work of discipleship for the sake of unity and peace in the body of Christ and in our local community.

And the next time you find yourself being rubbed the wrong way by the person in the pew ahead of you or chatting with a buddy and putting down the other fellow – stop yourself - and remember we are all part of the body of Christ, every part of the body is needed, and Jesus loves us all.