

**Bishop Jung NCJ Opening Worship Sermon**  
**Thursday, July 14, 2016**  
**Living Together ... amid Diversity**  
**Ephesians 4:7-11 (The Message)**

What a beautiful community we are! Would you give your hands to each other? Such a powerful witness that we celebrate as our new leaders were lifted up for the church yesterday. You're great, you're wonderful, you're a beautiful community. Pray with me.

We come to worship you this morning, o God. Bless your community, your sons, and your daughters. May your words ignite through your servants' mouths. Amen.

In 1821, the Caledonian Mercury wrote of the British Empire, "On her dominions the sun never sets..." The British Navy was highly effective in conquering much of our earth. Many English genuinely believed that their military invasions benefitted the colonized by bringing them Western civilization and Christianity. And it happened to benefit the English as well with access at no cost to the world's resources.

Another Englishman, D. H. Lawrence, mocked this English arrogance in his poem, *To Be Superior*:

How nice it is to be superior!  
Because really, it's no use pretending, one *is* superior,  
isn't one?  
I mean people like you and me. –

Quite! I quite agree.  
The trouble is, everybody thinks they're just as superior  
as we are; just as superior. –

That's what's so boring! people are so boring.  
But they can't really think it, do you think?  
At the bottom, they must *know* we are really superior  
don't you think?  
Don't you think, *really*, they *know* we're their superiors? –

I couldn't say.  
I've never got to the bottom of superiority.  
I should like to.

I'm Korean. I'm half kimchi and the other half is Wisconsin cheese. I belong to the East. In recent years, many Koreans have adopted Western customs and culture. Western ways have been good to many Koreans economically. Korean businessmen wear Western suits and ties. Korean musicians excel with Bach and Mozart. Korean children learn English. But much of our rich cultural heritage is being forgotten. The poor are being exploited.

The Lord we follow, Jesus of Nazareth, was not of the West but of the Middle East. At the time of Jesus' birth, Palestine was under occupation by the armies of Rome. According to Matthew, Magi from the Far East honored and celebrated Jesus' birth. His birth was no threat to them, but something to be celebrated. The Magi welcomed new leadership and followed the star to honor Jesus.

However, to Herod, ruling Palestine on behalf of the Western power of Rome, Jesus' birth was a threat – a threat requiring extreme measures. To get rid of this threat, he killed every Palestinian boy under the age of two years.

Nowhere can we find a clearer contrast between Eastern and Western mindsets than in these birth stories from Matthew. I'm Asian. I belong to the East. For Asians, everything is interrelated, interdependent, and mutually embracing. This is the matrix I have inherited as a Korean-Asian. Mutual acceptance is always higher wisdom and way of living. This is my foundational ground. Living in the midst of diversity is our God-given reality. The yin and the yang are not divisions between you and me, but aspects of each of our lives. Fred Rogers in his Neighborhood put this in simple terms. Good and bad are not distinctions between "Us" and "Them". He sang,

Sometimes people are good,  
and do just what they should.  
But the very same people who are good sometimes  
are the very same people who are bad sometimes.  
It's funny, but it's true.  
It's the same, isn't it, for me and you.

Reflect with me on the stories of creation that are the first words of our Scriptures. They've been subject to abundant interpretations and misinterpretations. But they are a profound source of wisdom from a Middle-Eastern perspective.

The Genesis stories of creation are clear on these basic premises. **First** – this entire world was created by one God. It belongs to its Creator. Not one thing was created by a devil or an evil power. Not according to Genesis. There's no dualism. All comes from God - even the serpent - even the capacity to defy our creator. **Second** - there is one creator or all human beings. Each of us is a beloved child of God. Even those who might call themselves our enemies were also created by one God. **Third** – God built only one wall - the boundary that keeps us from returning to the pretense of innocence. We've been expelled from the garden. None can claim moral superiority. The first couple tried to do that. Adam said, "It was Eve's fault." Eve said, "It was the serpent's fault – the serpent that **you** created." God ignored their attempts – our attempts – to pass the buck. God expelled us from any claim of innocence or deniability of responsibility.

God's wall is unlike the walls we humans build. God's wall does not divide humans from each other. In God's creation, there is no "other."

Walls. We humans build many walls, always attempting to protect us from "the other". We believe – whoever we are – that we are superior and need walls to protect us. We in the US established a border between the US and Mexico years ago. We fought wars to establish a border between "Us" and "Them." When did God ordain that there should be a border?

As United Methodists, we are seekers of "perfection". Pastors to be ordained are asked if they are growing towards perfection. Paul speaks of this as "growing up" in the faith, reaching maturity (Eph. 4:13). Paul's words, "We must no longer be children" (Eph. 4:14). Perfection, maturity - pick your favorite metaphor, but each assumes growth and change. Are we holding fast to the faith we came to believe some years ago? If so, both Wesley and the apostle Paul question us. They ask "Why has your faith not grown?" And let's be clear: Faith growth does not mean growth in certainty, but growth in understanding and compassion. Asks Wesley, "Are you growing towards perfection"? Asks Paul are you growing up in your faith?

Unity and maturity are the theme of Ephesians in chapter 4. Yesterday's reading from the first six verses emphasized our unity:

You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. (Eph. 4:5-6)

Today's reading, immediately following yesterday's, adds a major footnote lest we be confused that Oneness and Unity means Sameness. Says Paul:

But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift. (Eph. 4:7)

Of course we don't look and speak and act the same! But, let's be honest, often we become uncomfortable with those who don't speak and act the same. Sometimes we become so uncomfortable that we lobby to establish church laws that declare the other "wrong" and ourselves "right". We claim that we have power, that we have such dignity to put others down.

I recently dealt with charges brought by a colleague against a Wisconsin retired clergy who officiated at a wedding. I brought the accuser and the accused together. The accused agreed to apologize to clergy colleagues for any distress her actions brought to them. Following this year-long just resolution process, one clergy upset with this resolution came to me to protest. "The law is the law," he iterated. This led to a productive, prayerful conversation in which we both were enriched: tears, holding hands, and praying for Christ's church, all for the glory to god. We were in different camps, but we were together.

Later in the day, however, I could not help but think about the many rants of the apostle Paul about those who were adamant about observing the law. Grace. It's about grace. Grace, Paul kept saying it again and again. Nothing else is saving. Only grace! Of course the law requires circumcision. But, according to Paul, the grace of God through Jesus Christ doesn't give a hoot about this law.

I feel the Holy Spirit at work in the margin of grace. It's alright to be in cracks, to be in between, to not agree, to be very uncomfortable. Some say we are at a low point in our denomination, but the Holy Spirit will lift us up. We will be a hope for the world if we avoid simply being nice and going our separate ways. That will wound God's heart in so many ways.

Says Paul in today's reading, "Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift." What, therefore, can keep us from affirming the gifts of those who are different? What can keep us from affirming the gifts of our GLBTQ brothers and sisters? What can keep us from being prophetic witnesses in this world? We must build a beloved community; a world in which racism and bigotry and poverty and militarism no longer rule.

Walls. That's what keeps us from affirming each other. Walls we have built, walls to protect our own kind; we must tear them down. We must put a crack in them and let the Holy Spirit shine.

We United Methodist speak of our commitment to what we've termed the Great Commission of Jesus.

Matthew reports it this way in Ch. 28:18-20. Listen carefully to what Jesus does (and does not) expect us to do:

Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

Nothing in that commission is about what we should teach others "to believe about Jesus." Nothing, nothing about "believing in Jesus." No such thing. It's all about following Jesus, teaching as he has taught. Teaching as he commanded. The Gospels are all clear that the greatest commandments are loving God and loving one another. That's it.

It's a tragic irony. The issue threatening to divide our denomination is one never mentioned by Jesus in any of the Gospel accounts. Not once. Jesus' great commission is: "To instruct as Jesus commanded." "Love God, Love your Neighbor." That's it. It does not allow for us to proclaim that

our personal beliefs supersede the teaching of Jesus. A tragic irony – folks willing to divide the church to uphold an idea that Jesus never bothered to mention. Do I condemn these persons? No! Absolutely not! Their faith and insights are precious. But God asks us to set aside our own agenda. The world is hurting and crying. Church, let us stop hurting. May we say, “I desire to live as Jesus lived.”

But God’s truth is not established by the votes of General Conference delegates. Laws are human constructions. Grace. Grace, not law says Paul in his many rants on the subject.

Wesley in Sermon 39 on “The Catholic Spirit” proclaimed:

Every wise man, therefore, will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions, than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question, "Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart"

We are called by Christ to share his teachings. That’s the Great Commission. We are blessed with many different gifts, perspectives, insights, races, cultures, economic classes, human sexuality. Even other species, we are all blessed. Some of our blessings are seemingly in conflict with those of other sisters and brothers. Get over it! We’re part of the same faith community. Christ did not command us to agree with each other. He commanded us to share his teachings – teachings he summed up as “Love God” and “Love Your Neighbor.”

Amen.