

The Inconvenience of Difference

A few weeks ago, I was sitting in my apartment in the morning, drinking tea and writing in my journal as I always do. I found myself staring out the window at the early morning light, marveling at the particular January-ness of the color palette-- the low, rising sun casting a pale yellow light across the rooftops of my neighborhood, fading up to a light blue sky covered with a wisp of cirrus clouds. The precise colors were those of winter in New England. These are colors that fill me with wonder, delight, and a powerful sense of home. I *love* winter.

And yet, as I sat there, next to Kevin, my partner of four years, I couldn't help thinking about how that the same low light that I love is precisely what fills him with a sense of sadness and desolation. He is a man from Kentucky, and loves the sun-drenched, deep yellow light of summer. He really struggles with the New England winter, with its short days, dark nights and bitter cold that makes his poor hands dry up and crack and bleed.

Now, this may seem like a small, perhaps innocuous thing, this difference between us. But, it has been a surprisingly tough thorn in our relationship, a divide that at times has seemed insurmountable, and has caused its fair share of tension. We are in that time of our life where we are planning our future together, and this small difference has pushed me to imagine a life outside my beloved New England, far away from family. It has been an inconvenient difference between two people working to be in relationship with one another. It has challenged me to reimagine the life I thought I was going to lead.

Perhaps you have someone close to you in your life with whom you differ, difference of opinion, difference in perspective, or ways of looking at the world. Or a different kind of upbringing that makes it harder to understand where the other person is coming from.

And, if a small, somewhat trivial difference like preference for one season over the other can be such a force in my relationship with Kevin, think about the force of differences packed with generations, if not millennia, of power struggles, or violence, or oppression. Differences of race, gender identity, class, ability, sexual orientation, citizenship status, ancestral heritage, education levels -- all this stuff is hard to navigate in relationships because these differences are real. They are packed with sometimes unseen and untold histories. They are fraught with potential not only to create barriers that block our ability to connect, but to misunderstand one another, mistrust one another, have tension with one another.

This is, to say the least, inconvenient when we try to build relationships and community and lives and democracies with one another.

With all this in mind, let's imagine the Corinthians, the community to whom Paul is writing to in this letter, calling for unity. Close your eyes if you need to. It's near the end of the first century. You live in the Greek city of Corinth, a port city on an isthmus, kind of like Panama—a tiny strip of land connecting two larger land masses. Your city connects a wide variety of people from a wide variety of places, both by sea and by land. It is full of travelers from far away places like Rome or Cyprus or Macedonia, intermingled with people who have lived there their whole lives. You are part of a small, diverse community in a very new religious sect. You're all a little new to this whole Jesus thing, and you've had many teachers -- Cephas, Apollos, Paul-- come visit your community teaching a variety of ways to live the good news of the gospel. They have varying ideas about baptism, and worship, and what it means to be followers of Christ, and they all leave, leaving you to figure it out amongst yourselves.

Maybe, you are one of those of whom Paul mentions in his letter, a quarreler. Perhaps the tension had started with something small, a difference of opinion about music or ritual. Or maybe it is a fight about who gets to lead worship — between people whose family is from the north and those from the south, who each want to worship to emulate rituals in their family traditions. Perhaps it is about something bigger. Maybe you, like most people in the community, are poor, living day to day, at the bottom of the totem pole. You feel you are being taken advantage of by the richer people in your community. Maybe someone is abusing their power. And now, you hear these words from Paul, a teacher who visited you awhile back: “Be united in the same mind.” “Let there be no divisions among you.”

Now, this may sound irreverent, but as I hear this as my imaginary person in Corinth, I find myself at least rolling my eyes, if not shaking my fist, at Paul. “It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you!?” Of course there are quarrels! We are people from different backgrounds trying to come together and create something! We are from different places with different stories and different livelihoods and different ideas of what this community should be. And that one guy is just *such* a jerk. This is hard. These differences between us are real, and sometimes even hurtful. And you want us to pretend we are of one mind?

In progressive communities, we talk a lot about unity across difference. We praise the value of diverse neighborhoods and congregations, but frame our similarities as what binds us together, despite difference. We talk about finding common ground, about focusing on our common humanity, about seeing the universal values that bind us as one people of God, or

as one body of Christ. Let there be no divisions among us. Let us all be in agreement. Let us be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

Yet too often these words are read in a way that erases the particularities of our histories and the differences between us. And, too often when people are called to unite, it is the people in power that get to set the standard that everyone else must assimilate into. If I were that person in Corinth, I imagine myself hearing this and thinking that I must get in line, and stop standing up for myself. Stop causing trouble. Calls for unity can lead to silencing of those who don't have power.

Difference is indeed inconvenient. But what about if we look curiously at one another, into our differences and not in spite of them? What if we are open to the possibility for tension to change us? Can we find in that curiosity and openness a connection, something that transcends the convenience of similarity?

Just yesterday, I marched alongside many of you in the Boston Women's March for America. It was beautiful. As one person in a sea of 125 thousand people, in one march in a connected web of hundreds of marches worldwide, I felt small, in the best sense of the word. I was part of something bigger than myself, this mass of people all marching the same direction. United. Yet there was a moment yesterday, just as we all were feeling antsy to start marching and end the program, where about 6 teenagers stepped up to the microphone and shared why they were marching. And the reasons were all different. For my community of disabled kids, one said, for queer black and brown folks, said another. Indeed, we started the march here at the church by going around and sharing why we were here. We all had reasons, rooted in the particularity of our life experiences, to be at that march.

Of course, some of you who may have read in the news that the planning process of the march was filled with tension. Started on a whim by a few white women, early on the march was criticized by women of color, immigrants and queer women for not being representative of all women. Many white women responded, offended— This is a time for unity! They cried. Aren't we all women? But the history of women in this country is not the same. In particular, the history of the relationship between white women and women of color is filled with racism and prejudice against women of color. In the women's suffrage march in 1913, many white women resisted and resented the participation of women of color, who first had to advocate and push for their right to be there, and then were forced to march at the end of the parade. What may on the surface seem like quarrels and divisiveness, are people standing up for their rights.

What happened at yesterday's march was unity, for a moment, but it was also a beautiful, messy, engagement of difference. The "quarrels" of the women of color and immigrant women and queer women changed the march as they stepped into the leadership team. The march shifted, became something bigger than the voice of one kind of woman. It held the tension of those quarrels, and that tension unleashed a creativity and spirit that was far more powerful than if it had been squashed in the name of unity.

In his book, *healing the heart of democracy*, Parker Palmer talks about the power of "holding tension in life giving ways." He talks about the difference between two kinds of stress—one that is negative and destructive, distress, and one, eustress, that comes "from being stretched by alien ideas, values and experiences." I believe deeply that this second kind of stress holds untapped creative energy in our relationships and our communities and in our democracy.

The hard part, of course, is telling the difference. When is divisiveness just destructive, and when can it be life giving? To be honest, I don't know. We all know relationships and communities where the engagement of difference can be toxic. And I admit that there are people whose views I find so hateful and violent that to think about engaging them with curiosity is really hard for me. I know the way we engage difference has to change depending on who has more power in any given relationship. But I do think that if we can, in general, shift our thinking from trying to only focus on uniting over what is similar in us to looking curiously at what makes us different, and engaging in those differences with love, it can shift our way of thinking in a profound way.

As I've been wrestling with this part of Paul's letter, which goes on to talk about the messiness of unity in depth, I've been appreciating the fact that we know that these letters go both ways. We know the Corinthians wrote back, even though the letters are missing. So imagining Paul in correspondence, in relationship, with these communities all across the ancient world, perhaps hearing back letters that expressed the very frustration I vented as my imaginary Corinthian, I can appreciate the kind of messy, tension filled unity those early Christians were working to knit together into one body of Christ that was stronger because it engaged in the differences between them.

This week, when you notice differences you have with the people around you, be curious about them. What about that thing that your husband does that is so annoying to you could be tied to a part of his particular upbringing or story? What about your neighbor's ugly lawn ornaments might reflect their particular family traditions that give them great joy? What about that person on facebook that keeps commenting on your wall, what might

be going on in their life that is causing them to be needing attention? Look curiously at these differences, and push yourself to be open to changing and stretched because of them.

This past election season has tapped into many of our fears of those different from us, fears that, based on what we've seen so far, will likely continue to be nurtured by our new President. None of us are immune to these fears -- I certainly am not. But the answer can't just be to talk about unity. To become more resilient to the power that fear of difference can have over us, we must not gloss over the them. We must look at them curiously, engage them, and stare courageously at the sometimes brutal history that belies them, and be open to change because of them. And, recognize that the tension that can come with this engagement can lead to something far more beautiful and powerful and resilient than if we had left those differences unexplored.