

**“Putting Aside Childish Ways”**  
**Texts: I Corinthians 1:10-11; I Corinthians 13:1-13**  
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**October 4, 2009**

*When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. I Corinthians 13:11*

When I was a child, my understanding of family had to do with the people with whom I lived, my parents upon whom I was dependent - my mother for comfort and security, my father for making sure our family had a roof over our heads and food on the table. I had a brother with whom I was often at odds. He was four years older than I; we really had a difficult time sitting in the back seat of the car together. The fiercest of sibling rivalry can erupt in that back seat.

When I was a child, I *loved* God. I prayed. I read my Bible stories over and over again. I loved to slip into the sanctuary of our church by myself. My aunt worked there, and she often gave me the run of the place. My favorite location was the sanctuary, where I could look up at the stained-glass window. There was Jesus surrounded by sheep at his feet. He seemed to be looking directly at me, his arms extended, reaching out only to me. When I was older, though not yet grown, I still loved God, but going to church had lost some of its luster. I, in fact, became itchy and bored more often than not in church, especially on Sunday evening, when our kind, well-intentioned pastor would preach a sermon that sounded as if he had just sort of mixed it together about 15 minutes before the worship started. He flew by the seat of his pants and rarely said anything interesting, and so I became adept at doing two things at once, my first version of multi-tasking. I learned how to look pious while looking at him and pass notes right and left. It was during that period of my life that I considered going into full-time overseas missionary work. Later, I realized that that was not my call from God, but then I was at a point where I would do almost anything to get out of going to the Sunday night worship service.

I share these snippets from my childhood and youth with you, not because my life is particularly interesting, but because who we were “back in the day,” where we lived, what happened to us, has a great effect on who we become as adults. Essayist Thomas Lynch writes, “In childhood we come by our identities, those elements of place and people, tribe and sect that tell us who we are.” (1) In childhood, we are steeped in a particular set of mores and cultural attitudes and behaviors. I grew up in the segregated South in the 1950s and ‘60s. I remember when I was in junior high school the Freedom Riders crossed the Alabama-Mississippi State line. The day the bus crossed the state line, the students in my high school were given excused absences, in case any of us wanted to go out to the highway and hurl insults at the buses as they passed by.

What happens to us when we are young has a great effect on us. As a child, I never met a Muslim, or a Hindu or a Buddhist. Shoot, I never met anybody from California! I read lots of books, most of them authored by men - white men, though I would throw in an occasional Louisa May Alcott or Nancy Drew mystery. I knew little about the world outside the boundaries of the world into which I had been born. When I went off to college - all the way to Atlanta, Georgia and Emory University, my brother wisely said to me, "Jo, whatever you do, don't just stay with one little group. College is the place to encounter all sorts of people and ideas. Don't cut yourself off; it's people who are different from you, who help you the most in figuring out what kind of person you want to be." That was one of the best pieces of advice I ever received.

I thought about my brother's words this week as I was trying to grasp more fully the meaning of World Communion Sunday and what happens to us when we gather on this day. Here, we remember that we are citizens of a world marked by great difference and diversity, and yet we are members of God's family, equal offspring of our Creator, recipients of the same divine DNA. I'm not just speaking of us here today. Christians from across the planet, from Indonesia to Amman, Jordan, from every continent on earth are coming together and looking back to that night in the Upper Room, but even more, looking forward to the day - to that future "where the whole human race will be gathered at last, at home around the Father's table." (2) Today, we remember that God calls each of us and all of us to move to higher ground and to put away - to put behind us - childish ways.

It was 40 years ago, July, 1969 that the first lunar module landed on the moon. We are familiar with Neil Armstrong's words on that occasion - "One small step . . ." I also love these words of Neil Armstrong that day: "Here men from the planet Earth first set foot on the moon July, 1969 A.D. We come in peace for all mankind."

Buzz Aldrin was there with Neil Armstrong. He was actually the one who piloted the lunar module that landed on the moon 40 years ago. Buzz Aldrin was at the time a Presbyterian elder. He had been granted permission by the session of his church - First Presbyterian Church, Webster, Texas, to celebrate the sacrament on the moon. He thereby "extended the reach of the Lord's Table a quarter of a million miles." (3) Do you not love the thought of Aldrin holding in his gloved hand bread that had been blessed? Don't you love the thought of his saying, "The body of Christ, broken for you?" "Good news for even the moon to hear." (4)

What is God's will for the world, indeed the entire cosmos? God's will is reconciliation. God's will is peace in the human family. God was in the world reconciling the entire cosmos to himself.

Ours is a very complicated time. In the 21st century as a new era begins, I confess to you, I wish there were a little less difference and a little more similarity. I wish the world were a simpler place. I wish everybody shared *my*

outlook on life! You know, God could have made the world different from the way God made it. We could have all been one skin color; we could all have identical wants and needs and personalities, one political outlook, one team to cheer for, and so on and so forth. But God clearly did not want a homogenized, pasteurized, non-diversified human race.

I can never claim to have read God's mind, but I am going to step out on a limb today and say that God must like difference, or God would have made us alike. In the beginning, when God made man and God made woman – let's just say that difference appeared immediately. I'm not speaking here about physiology alone. You remember that funny monologue play of the '90s, "Defending the Caveman", in which the story is told of woman and a man who run into a couple that they had not seen in some time. The wives begin to speak to one another. One of the wives says to the other, "I haven't seen you in so long; you look great, how are the grandchildren; where'd you get that outfit you're wearing...?"

As for the guys, one asks the other, "Are you still driving that old car of yours?"

There is a difference between and among people, and difference is not a bad thing. For Christians, when we are baptized into Christ, it doesn't just mean that, individually, we are all set. We are baptized into the one body, the church. What a great irony it has been, that of all human institutions, the church, a divinely established institution, has been so torn by division since the beginning.

Paul lets his frustration with the fractious Corinthians show when he writes, "One of you says 'I belong to Paul,' and another says 'I belong to Apollos' and another '... to Cephas'. Has Christ been divided?" he asks.

The Corinthians weren't the only ones divided back there in the beginning. There was the famously bitter argument over circumcision. It manifested itself in Rome, Ephesus, Phillipi, Galatia: The traditionalists versus the newcomers. Back and forth they went. There for a while Paul seemed to be the only person on earth who understood that, once Christ had come, there was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. We are all one in Christ Jesus. He is our peace. He has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the division among us. Of all the things for which I'm grateful, during my time at Morningside Presbyterian Church, I am most grateful that this congregation has risen to higher ground. We have been blessedly free in recent years of division and argument. We have learned that the way of Christ is a much better way. Paul wrote: When we were minors, we couldn't do any better. We were enslaved to the elemental spirits in the world, but that's all changed now. We are heirs through God of a new way of being.

When we were children, we divided up in our little groups, and we thought our group was better than all the other groups. But when we grow up, we realize that it's not a good thing to privilege some and to exclude others. When we grow up, we realize that because we want to be treated in a certain way, it's important to

treat others in the way we would want to be treated. We have been given the spiritual ability to claim the spiritual gift of love, not just any love but *agape* love - the way God loves the world. Though we are broken, sinful people, God gives us the spiritual capacity for *agape* love and then gives us the love as well. We really can put behind us envy and pride; we really can put on patience and kindness.

Carl Sandburg once identified what was for him the ugliest word in the English language. What do you imagine that word might be? It's the word *exclusive*. Edwin Markham, another poet, captures what Sandburg meant in his poem "Outwitted".

He drew a circle  
That shut me out  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout,  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle that took him in!

In his remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington in February, the President said, "The very nature of faith is that some of our beliefs are not and will never be the same. We subscribe to different accounts of how we came to be here and where we are going next. But let us remember, let us remember, there is no religion, whose basic tenant is hate - none. There is one law that binds all great religions together. The Torah commands that which is hateful to you do not do to your fellow. In Islam: None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother that which he has wished for himself. Jesus said, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

I have never understood how a follower of Christ or of any other great religion could be hateful in his heart or in his actions. If as predicted the 21st century becomes the most religious century in human history, then those who follow these great world religions must step forward, must take the wheel and turn the ship, unless civilization crash against the rocks of religious zealotry.

In his book *When Religion Turns Evil*, Charles Kimball writes, "Holy war is not holy. Whatever religious justifications Christians or Muslims have put forward in the past, the results of holy warfare have always been catastrophic." (5) One historian has wisecracked that the sole economic benefit of the Crusades was the introduction of the apricot. People of faith, we must look to our tradition for clarity and guidance for the day ahead.

Our tradition has loads of guidance to offer. One of the most important pieces is this; it's clear as a bell: Make love your aim.

When I was a child, my mother often told me, "Be sweet." Being sweet was thought to be the answer to just about everything back then. But being sweet is not enough. "When Jesus tells us to love our neighbors, he's not telling us to do so with "a warm cozy feeling," as Frederick Buechner suggests. "Jesus tells us to

love them in the sense of being able to work for their well-being, even if it means sacrificing our own well-being.” (6) Put those lenses on and look at the major issues we are facing in our country today. You just might see things differently.

Sweetness can get tiresome, but love has no expiration date. Unlike prophecy and knowledge, love alone has about it the quality of eternity. Love in the public sphere manifests itself as justice and compassion. Love is the path to redemption. Love sometimes isn't sweet; love requires confrontation and courage sometimes.

What are we going to do about the epidemic of deaths of children, particularly children in the inner cities of our country? Are we not going to come together to find some common ground out of our common concern for the children who are not only the future of our nation, but who have every right to live and to be safe when they're little?

It's hard, this love, this grown-up, non-childish love.

Dr. Roberts, I remember being in your sanctuary some years ago after there had been a terrible episode of violence, a shooting out in Buckhead. A number of people in the stock trading business were killed. A lot of Atlantans gathered at Ebenezer Church to pray about it. The speaker at the gathering was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. After he had made an eloquent presentation, it was time for questions, and there was a microphone in the center aisle. People lined up to speak to Desmond Tutu and ask him questions. One particularly angry and distressed man stood at the microphone and said, “Bishop Tutu, what in the world are we going to do about guns in the United States? We are shooting each other at an epidemic rate. The National Rifle Association is behind all of it, and what are we going to do about it?”

There was a pause. Desmond Tutu, after the silence, said in his quiet way, “The first thing we're going to do is to remember that every single person who is a member of the National Rifle Association is a beloved child of God.”

Here is where we begin, if we follow the One who came to live among us to show us “a more excellent way”.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”

And all God's children said, “O Lord, O Lord, please. Let it be so.”

(1) Thomas Lynch, “Faith matters,” *Christian Century*, May 5, 2009. p. 57.

(2) Donald M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957, p.107.

(3) Richard J. Mouw, "Moon Supper," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, October 5, 2009.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Charles Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2002.

(6) Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, Harper&Row, 1973, p.54.