

CHILDREN OF THE SAME GOD

Scripture - Galatians 3: 23-29

An exciting week lies ahead for our church. Beginning tomorrow, this year's the annual conference of the International Council of Community Churches will be held at the Hilton Hotel on Clearwater Beach! About 600 people will be coming here from all over the country; from all over the world! And despite their similarities, they will exhibit many differences - differences in terms of background, experiences, traditions, age, sex, color. Now, at and during this conference we are going to celebrate our commonness and our diversity! And we can do that because we are open and accepting people...despite our differences.

However, this conference will not reflect the world as we usually experience it - the "real" world. Regarding our Council churches...approximately half are white and half are black. Regarding our conference attendees...approximately half are white and half are black. For those of us who have been part of this organization and coming to this conference for some time, this is one of its attributes and opportunities which we know and love. But for new-comers...well, it might take some getting used to!

Have you ever heard anyone say: "I don't see color!" Of course you have. What baloney! I think I know where they are coming from. Their intentions are good; their hearts are right...but the statement is still baloney! And frequently such an observation is made by someone who is desperate to be and/or appear tolerant and unprejudiced. Nonetheless, it doesn't make sense. And it is completely impossible. Additionally, carried to its logical conclusion, the view is demeaning and counter-productive. Because, you see, if it were true, it would take away one of the very things which makes and identifies the whole and total person!

Let me carry that last thought to an extreme. Suppose one could get to the point where he or she really did not see color. Does that mean that he or she would also not see sex or age or size, etc.? If I were blind to all those characteristics of a person, it could get very confusing. Let me illustrate. I know this is my friend, Anthony Wells. There are certain things about him which help me in the identification. But if I did not see color, sex, age, size...I might think this was a twenty year-old, 120 pound, 6'7", blond-haired and blue-eyed member of the professional Swedish women's basketball team! And then I could not possibly ascertain anything about Anthony which would help me really know and understand him!

As with age and sex and size, race contributes to making us what we are; to making us what we become. And it gives us clues about each other. As a white man, I cannot even pretend to "feel" or "know" the black experience. Perhaps I can somewhat understand intellectually certain and limited aspects and elements of it...somewhat...but I have not been through it! So my comprehension could never be complete.

One of my clergy friends in Ohio was Harold Turner. Harold is black. Harold and I were rather close. We went through some ups and downs together. We watched each other's kids grow up. We shared ideas and observations, hopes and dreams. About 25 years ago, Harold and I were driving together to a minister's seminar just outside of Buffalo, New York. Twelve noon

arrived, and we began to consider stopping for lunch. Ahead was a diner with a bunch of trucks in its parking lot. Well, you know what they say about restaurants with trucks - if the truckers go there, the food has to be pretty good. We pulled in. After eating and again "hitting the road", Harold mentioned to me that if we had not been together, he would never have gone there! I was caught off guard...but I soon understood what he was talking about. And then, as the conversation continued, I heard about earlier times when he and Vera, if and when they traveled with their family, always took along food and drink just in case they could not find a place where it was comfortable and safe to stop! That was not the kind of thing I had ever had to think about; that was not the kind of thing I had ever had to worry about! I had also never had to think or worry about being refused service at a lunch counter; about being sent to the back of the bus; about not being rented a hotel or motel room; about having to use separate and unequal rest rooms; about being attacked because of a particular ethnicity! Such concerns were simply not part of my experience!

My friends, there are already enough built-in handicaps which prevent us from more fully understanding each other. So we don't have to add yet one more by refusing to "see" and acknowledge another person's race or color. Indeed, it is a vital and revealing part of that individual's history and development and "totality"! If I don't see your color...then I don't see all of you. If I don't see your color...then you, for me, are less than complete. If I don't see your color...then I have little or no idea where you are coming from. If I don't see your color...then I have stripped you of part of what makes you you!

So what does color (like age or sex and so on) tell us about others? Well, it certainly does not give us the whole story. There are always parts of every person which no other person can ever completely know or understand. But even if I cannot empathize with you because I haven't experienced what you have experienced...when I see as much of the whole you as possible: I can get an idea of the battles you've fought and the goals you've sought and the disappointments you've endured and the obstacles you've overcome and the dreams you've had and the victories you've won; I can get an idea of some of what has gone into the formation of your character and your personality; I can get an idea of where you might be coming from on given issues and concerns. And I can also try to better understand your feelings as you live life in your particular portion of our common world!

So...I don't want to hear anyone say: "I don't see color!" Because I won't believe them. But what I do want to hear is: "I do see color...but it doesn't matter!" It doesn't matter in the sense that it doesn't stand in the way of mutual understanding and relationship, of mutual acceptance and respect!

Paul talked about Christianity eradicating the importance of differences. He said that faith in God through Christ makes us family. He mentioned that, therefore, there were (within the Christian fold) no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. But Paul was talking about this being true within the context of the church. When folks returned to the world outside the church...the old "rules" still applied! Well, let me suggest to you that one of the true ends or goals of Christianity is to do away with the importance of such differences throughout the world...and not just within the Christian community! Our aim ought to be to have all people accept one another as brothers and sisters...despite their differences!

One thing which is so special about any ICCS conference is that at it we get to meet others as people; as individuals. And in such a setting we cannot hide behind the possession of group stereotypes and prejudices. A conference further offers us the opportunity to be

completely and refreshingly honest. You know, that's one thing which is still sometimes lacking among us - real honesty. We are so busy being nice, we are not always really honest! And without honesty, we can go just so far on niceness! If we cannot be honest with one another without risking ruptures in relationships, then we still have a considerable way to go! I suggest that we can be honest without being rude or disrespectful...just like we can disagree without being disagreeable.

Let me tell you a secret. There are some black folks I'm not crazy about. Of course, there are even more white folks I'm not crazy about. But all that has nothing to do with whether they're black or white. Rather, it has to do with how we get along as people; how we relate to one another - as fellow human beings! We need to get ourselves to the place where we do not accept or reject others because of race. Instead, we should respect one another as particular and unique persons - in openness; in honesty; in acceptance! We're not all the same...and yet...we are all the same! Do you understand what I'm trying to say? We are all different...and our differences help make us what we are - special and unique. Yet we are all people - part of the same family!

When I moved to Clearwater Beach in 1981, I had a good friend in Detroit, Michigan. Tragically, Darneau Stewart (a black man, a black minister) died about a month after I arrived. I still miss him. I think that ours was a unique relationship. I believe that we both benefited from it. He said things to me which I doubt he ever said to any other white man. And I know I said things to him which I never said to any other black man. And we could do that because we had "paid our dues"! We had gone through some highs and lows together. We had fought some fights together. We had talked and argued and disagreed with one another. And we had earned each other's trust; each other's respect; each other's love! Darneau and I realized and valued each other's differences! They helped make us what we were - people to be cared about by the other.

Here's a real shocker which you are going to have difficulty accepting - everyone doesn't like me! Now don't "pish-tush" - it's true. I, too, find it hard to understand...but there you have it. And yet even my staunchest critics will admit that I'm up-front and outspoken - they always know exactly where I'm coming from. Earlier I said that what I don't want to hear is: "I don't see color!" And then I went on to suggest that what we should hope for is the ability to honestly say: "I do see color...but it doesn't matter!" That would be the ideal. But now let me observe that the best I think we can currently and truly offer is: "I do see color...but I don't want it to matter!" That means we're trying; we're working; we're striving! That means that as people (black and white) of good will...we want to make a difference; we want things to drastically change! That means we are recognizing our weaknesses and prejudices (and we all have them)...but we're doing something about them!

My friends, unless and until we accept people as people...this world won't change. And what's holding us back besides our stubbornness, our anger, our pride, our fear? We may be different...but we are all children of the same God! And that makes us family!