

ROOM AT THE TABLE

This past week I had occasion to rent a cargo van. When I returned it to the rental place, they had one of their employees drive me home. I never did learn his name, but it was an eye-opening experience.

His work for the rental agency includes detailing cars, washing them after they are returned, and picking up folks who were renting vehicles. He is African-American, and like many drivers in their twenties, he had his seat back about as far as it would go, and his radio turned up with the bass on full. His red baseball cap was on backwards, and he had a lot of bling, a necklace, an earring, a ring or two.

When I got into the car, he asked me what I'd just returned. When I told him a van that seemed to be the end of our conversation. After a moment or two, I said, "I bet your job is like a day long test drive."

He laughed. "Yeah," he said, "yeah it is."

"I have a son," I said, "who worked for Enterprise for a few years. He was a district manager."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, down in Jersey."

He nodded, and then fell silent. As the radio thumped away, I realized he was listening to Hot 97, a hip-hop and rap station out of New York.

"I haven't heard Hot 97 for a long time," I said, "I have a friend who's Chief Engineer there. He's in charge of all their equipment, and when things get messed up with the transmitter on top of the Empire State Building, he's the one who goes out to fix it."

"Wow," he said, "sounds like a cool job!"

"Yeah," I said, "it is. Though his wife doesn't like him climbing the Empire State Building very much."

He nodded.

"Where did you say you were going?"

"Saugatuck Church," I said. "The big white one, just past the middle of town."

We'd already crossed the bridge, and in a minute or so, we were pulling into the driveway.

"Just drop me at the house," I said, "I live there."

He looked at me rather quizzically.

“I’m the pastor,” I explained.

“Oh no,” he said as he reached for the radio and switched it off. “I’ve been listening to Hot 97 with a pastor in the car.”

It was my turn to chuckle. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “There are far worse things in life!”

He seemed a bit relieved. He stopped the car. I slipped him a tip, and then I got out.

And I felt rather good about the whole thing. I’d managed to make a connection with him. Matt’s work with Enterprise, Hot 97. We’d really connected.

But had we really? It was a polite conversation, but I was talking about my son the District Manager, and my friend the Chief Engineer, to a kid who is washing cars for a living and driving strangers home. Not that there is anything wrong with detailing cars for a living. It’s an honest way to earn a dollar. And yes, we connected on the surface, and that’s not unimportant, but the reality is we come from two different worlds. Two very different worlds.

Throughout history, men and women, boy and girls, have been trying to overcome barriers like race and economic status, barriers that divide us one from the other. Sometimes we have succeeded. More often we have not.

Our scripture reading comes from a letter written by Paul to a church struggling to do just that. To understand, you need to know a bit about the city of Corinth.

It was one of the most cosmopolitan places in the ancient world. It was a major port, and people came and went from all over the world. It was populated by rich merchants, and impoverished slaves. Like most ports of call, it was home to many prostitutes, and sailors from all over the known world. People of all religious and ethnic backgrounds found their way to Corinth. It was in a word, diverse.

It was also a very rough and tumble city. Bar fights broke out all the time. Folks would just as soon beat you up as talk through differences.

In his travels, spreading the gospel, Corinth was one of Paul’s major stops. His preaching touched the hearts of rich and poor alike. His sermons brought in the educated and those who couldn’t even read or write. He spent a great deal of time there, helping the Corinthians set up their church which turned out to be very diverse, and after he left, he corresponded with them frequently.

Usually, his letters addressed the struggles they were having as they tried to connect with each other, as they tried to get along. Though the members of the church lived in the same city, they came from different worlds.

At the heart of his message was the notion that Holy Communion should be a unifier. Instead, they had turned it into a divider.

In that day, communion was served as part of a regular meal. It wasn't just a bit of bread and a sip of wine, rather it was the culmination of a shared supper—a pot luck, if you will. But the Corinthians had turned it into a competition. The rich folks brought elaborate foods, and kept them all to themselves, rich desserts, expensive cheeses, the best fruits, the finest wine. While the poor folks managed with little more than scraps. As Paul writes, “For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.” (I Corinthians 11:21) Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it: “[I've found] out that you bring your divisions to worship—you come together and instead of eating the Lord's Supper, you bring in a lot of food from outside and make pigs of yourselves. Some are left out, and go home hungry. Others have to be carried out, to drunk to walk.” (*The Message*, 2081-2082)

Then, Paul goes on to give them instructions as to how they are to conduct communion. Those instructions are not only the words we read in our scripture lesson this morning, they are also the words embedded in communion services to this day. They are called the Words of Institution. They are the word Jesus spoke at the Last Supper.

For Paul, Holy Communion is supposed to be a symbol of Christian unity. No matter what our differences, no matter how hard it is for us to connect at other times and in other places, no matter if we come from different worlds, when we come to the table, we are to set aside our differences and allow God's Spirit to bind us together as one. When we share the loaf and cup of communion, we are reminded that we are all God's children. We are reminded that in God's eyes we are all equal. Rich or poor, black or white, gay or straight, young or old, we are all loved by the Holy One. And in that divine love, we can find a unity that transcends all the barriers we can throw up. For there is room at the table for one and all.

Even though we work just a few miles apart, that young man at Enterprise and I do indeed live in two different worlds. More than likely, I'll never see him again. But the good news on this morning is that there is room for both of us at this table. Indeed, there is room for all those who wish to claim a seat. And there is enough to go around.

But there is more, for our task, once we fold our napkins and get up from the table, is to carry the sense of unity we can discover here, out into the world. Our task is to work for that day when the car detailer and the pastor come from one world, not two. Where the divisions between rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, young and old, are eliminated. A world where no one goes away hungry—and all are amply fed. A world where all children have access to good health care, and insurance to pay for it. A world where there is no more war, no more domestic violence, no more hatred born of divisions we create. It all starts in here at the table, but it ends up out there in the world.

It's not exactly why we call it World Communion Sunday—but then again, maybe it should be.

Amen

John H. Danner

