

Matthew 9:35--10:8 [9-23]; Diversity Sunday; June 18, 2017
Rich Weingartner

Before I begin, I want to dedicate this message, the service today, and the work we are doing to Stanley, Amanda, Oscar, Rodolfo, Antonio, Darryl, Angel, Juan, Luis, Cory, Tevin, Deonka, Simon, Leroy, Mercedes, Peter, Juan, Paul, Frank, Miguel, Javier, Jason, Eddie, Anthony, Christopher, Alejandro, Brenda, Gilberto, Kimberly, Akyra, Luis, Geraldo, Eric, Joel, Jean, Enrique, Jean, Xavier, Christopher, Yilmay, Edward, Shane, Martin, Jonathan, Juan, Luis, Franky, Luis, and Jerald. And to Josie, Mesha, Jamie Lee, JoJo, Jaqarrius, Keke, Chyna, Ciara, Alphonza, Chay, Kenneth, Sherrell, and Kenne. Also for Trayvon, Sandra, Kathryn, Sean, Eric, Rekia, Philando, Amadou, Mike, Kimani, Kenneth, Travares, Tamir, Aiyana, and Freddie.

Next, I have to let you know that I don't believe in God, I don't believe Jesus Christ existed and died for our sins, and I don't believe the Bible is the word of God. Now that pastor Ellen is questioning why she let me preach today and some of the congregation may be in shock, let me explain. These statements aren't true right now and not true most of the time, but I have my moments of doubt when I truly feel I don't believe. Many people may find that strange and question what type of Christian I am with such doubt, but I can tell you there is one that loves me and supports me no matter how much I doubt, and that is God. God loves me for who I am, a doubting sinning gay male Christian. We all fall short of perfection no matter how hard we try, but God still loves

us. It is because of this love that, especially in my darkest moments, I continually return to God.

That is the beauty of God's love - it knows no bounds and is unlimited. God loves all. Period, end of statement, no exclusions. God may not love some of our actions, but even with those actions, God loves us deep down and wants us to be reconciled together. God's unbounded love allows us to enjoy the beauty of diversity. If God loves all, then how can we not also love all. While pastors and others with education on the bible can easily find and quote scripture or other people's analysis of scripture, I turn to something I know and love - Star Trek. From an episode of The Original Series, Miranda says "The glory of creation is in its infinite diversity." to which Spock responds, "And the way our differences combine to create meaning and beauty." This reflects the basis for Vulcan philosophy, IDIC or Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations.

You can also think of diversity by thinking of a piano or other musical instrument. A piano has 88 keys for 88 notes. That is all, just 88 different notes. It doesn't take long to play them one at a time and the end result isn't all that interesting. It is when you combine them in various ways, chords, rhythms, dynamics, etc. that you create a very diverse sound. Think about all the songs that have been written and played over the years. No two exactly alike - all from 88 little notes.

Each of us has various aspects about who we are - our age, gender identity, marital status, race, height, weight, education, and so many more. There are many that are the same age as us, the same gender, same education background, etc. However, it is the very unique combination in each of us, that makes us a special unique child of God. No one else is exactly like us, but yet we are all alike in that God loves us exactly how we are. As I said before - God loves all. Period, end of statement.

I'm going to take a little sidebar here to explain something you'll find the service during the prayers. You'll notice that our normal response to the prayers isn't "Hear our prayer." but instead, "Receive our prayer." I first remember hearing this response at our recent synod assembly and also at the worship service we had yesterday as part of the Lutherans Always Reforming synod event at University Lutheran. Our synod's Bishop - Craig Satterlee explains it best when he says "The deaf community said to me, what does it say to us when we talk about God hearing our prayer when many deaf people don't hear of course and they don't speak their prayers, they might silently make them." Bishop Satterlee asked them what they suggested instead of Hear our prayer, and they said to use Receive our prayer. This is one of many ways we can minorly tweak a worship service to help be more inclusive to allow people to more easily feel God's love for them. Another example is to use the phrase "siblings in Christ" instead of "brothers and sisters in Christ" since some people don't identify as either male or female so they might struggle viewing themselves as a brother or a sister.

So, now we know God loves us, what do we do? We are called to share God's love with others. Today's gospel says "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." So just as Jesus saw this and called the disciples, we are being called to go out to the world being a shepherd and to spread the good news of God's love for all. While all deserve to hear the message of God's love, reality is there are certain communities of people where the message needs to be shared louder and harder as they have and continue to struggle to believe that there is a loving and caring God out there for them, since so often society and sometimes churches tell them the complete opposite.

This brings me back to the list of names I dedicated this message to. These are the 49 people who were murdered about one year ago in Orlando, most of them part of the LGBTQ community and most Latinx. Also the 13 (that we know of) transgender individuals who have been killed this year, and a list of some black people that people feel were killed unjustly. It is because of these and the hundreds and thousands more people whose lives end too early simply because of who they are, that we must hear God's summons to us to spread the message of love and peace. These people and many other people struggle knowing that God's love is real, because society around them often tells them they aren't loved because of some aspect of their diverse nature. In fact, growing up I struggled greatly with the duality of my personality - being gay and being a Christian. For the longest time I lived almost two separate lives because I could not reconcile the two worlds together in my mind. Living in the Upper Peninsula and the

silence from the church didn't help matters. When I turned to the bible for help that really didn't help matters either. When reading Leviticus 18:22 "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination." I thought that the notes provided would help me understand and reconcile how this pertains to my life and feelings, but I was wrong, since the notes said "Several abominations, or wicked actions, are listed here: Having homosexual relations.... Society today takes some of these practices lightly, even trying to make them acceptable. But they are still sins in God's eyes. If you consider them acceptable, you are not judging by God's standards."

This is why we as individuals and we as Faith Lutheran Church and we as the universal Christian church are called to share God's love - people need to know that their creator loves them unconditionally and wants to be in relationship with them. I must say, that when reading through today's bulletin, I am very pleased with how we share God's love through our actions to all kinds of diverse people. We serve the young through VBS, we serve the more life-experienced people through our 60 +/- group, we serve the economically less fortunate through the Arrow Tree Food Pantry, we serve those who care for others with our caregiver support group, we care for those with physical or mental concerns by providing worship services at the Willows and the Dobie Road center, we care for people of all races with events planned by our forum planning team, and through today, our welcoming statement, and the RIC designation we show that we care and love all God's children - no questions asked.

Now, why do we do this? Well, to summarize, we do it because we are Christians who are Lutheran. The start of the 2nd reading today gives us a big hint as well, "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God."

A few years ago, I was having a conversation with someone about why I did so much for the church and the community - the conversation led to doing good works to gain favor with God. I said "No, that isn't why I do it, we don't need good works to get into heaven." They then asked me what motivated me to do this if it wasn't required. I said, which I think is a good summary of the core Lutheran belief (Pastor can correct me later if I'm wrong), that "God loves me, God sent Jesus to die for my sins, I am therefore saved by God's grace through faith alone. This frees me from the bondage of sin." Ok, so that still doesn't quite say why I do good works - but think of it this way - someone gives you a wonderful gift, something so expensive you could never buy it yourself. How do you respond? With thanks! You are probably willing to freely do something for the gift giver as well. Thus, why I work to serve my Lord - I have been given the biggest and best gift ever - unconditional love and eternal life in peace and glory - so I respond with thanksgiving by working to take care of God's world.

Or to put it another way, that fits perfectly with today, Paul, in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, says "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old

has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:17-20)

So, as Christ's ambassadors, as we are reconciled to God, let us reconcile the world to God by sharing God's love for all. Amen!