The Big Tent: Why Can’t We All Just Get Along

Galatians 3:26-29 Kimby Young

Ephesians 2:13-22 August 11, 2024

I have two sermon titles today – the short one, the Big Tent, and the longer explanation of what I mean – Why can’t we all just get along. When I first started talking about this sermon with staff, session and worship team, I mentioned that the Presbyterian Church USA has described the church as a Big Tent. A lot of different things fit under a big tent. A big tent is all encompassing. Some people asked “Is it a three ring circus under the tent?” Sometimes church can feel like a circus - a little crazy – but that’s not really what I mean. The name Big Tent means that Presbyterians try to throw the canvas wide over a variety of believers and be all inclusive. We have a lot of different viewpoints in our church and a lot of different activities. We want the big tent of the church to cover and include that wide diversity. We want everyone to know they belong. All are welcome in God’s love. As a denomination, we try to be as open as possible. In other words, what that looks like is - in our pews, sitting right together side by side, for example, we have republicans and democrats and independents and people who don’t care a thing about politics. In our wider church we have many cultures, races, needs and abilities. We don’t have to be the same. God’s tent is big and wide and covers all of us. God’s arms are wide and open. There is room enough for everyone. Come on in and share. Come as you are.

However, as diverse as we are, as different as we are – that can lead to some problems. Hence the circus metaphor. Three rings actively moving at the same time. There is a lot going on under the tent of God’s church. Under the big tent, there is some confusion sometimes. Maybe not so much locally, but within the wider Presbyterian Church USA. We have pro-life and pro-choice. We have pro-Palestine and pro-Israel. We have pacifists. We have military personnel and veterans. We have bikers and runners and quilting enthusiasts and artists. We have tatoos and business suits. We have people who like traditional hymns with organ and people who like drums and guitar, and people who like both and even more musical diversity. We have people of all generations who lead and worship together. We have every race and ethnic heritage you can imagine, speaking multiple languages. We do not all agree. By any means. We all have opinions. We all have heritage. We all have needs. We all have expectations. You don’t have to agree with me on anything – though I’m glad most of you do agree on many things. I can’t tell you what to believe. No pastor or elder can tell you what to believe. I **can** tell you what I believe. I can ask you to share your beliefs. We each have to listen to God and make our own choices. And we are best when we listen to each other, especially those who are different than us.

As a denomination, we not only make room for diversity – we encourage it. Because we believe God encourages diversity. We believe we grow as humans and our faith grows if we listen to people who are not exactly like us. The more we listen, the more we grow. We believe we are better together than we are apart. We are encouraged to seek out people who are not like us, and to invite them to the table of Jesus Christ. The table is wide. The tent is big. The love of God is greater than we can imagine. Everyone can find a place and a space to share their gifts and to serve God fully. You can sit on the side and watch; or you can jump right in.

The challenge is – we are human. Sometimes we don’t get along. The belief is – you have to try. We have to try to get along. God calls us to try to get along, to try to understand, to try to love others, and to see Jesus in others, to see the face of God in the people around you. Even with the people with whom you most disagree. Because you just never know how God will inspire. You never know who God will use. You never know how the Spirit will help you to grow in grace.

One of the most important things I learned in seminary is how very much I do not know. I don’t have all the answers. And I worry about preachers who think they do have all the answers. In seminary, we asked a lot of questions, and we were asked a lot of questions. They made us think about what we believe and why. They encouraged us to question what we believe – because, as I say, you never know how God might teach you. Some people don’t like to question their faith. They don’t like doubts. Perhaps they are afraid they might lose something if faith changes. But changing faith is not losing faith. It can be deepening faith, growing in faith, widening our experience of God. For Presbyterians – generally – we believe we don’t know everything. We recognize uncertainty as valuable. We believe we must continue to learn. We believe we must be open to God helping us to change, to be more and more faithful. We believe God will move and inspire and reform us, if we continue to seek God, if we continue to listen. The truth is when you question your assumptions, when you admit you don’t know everything, when you are open to new ways of believing, that’s when there is room for God to move. That’s when there are miracles. That’s when God surprises you with grace and you receive a new revelation that just might change your life – or someone else’s life for the good.

Here is the challenge with everything I have been saying. There is always an opposite opinion, a balance. It takes discernment and inspiration to find that proper balance. Some have said that this openness of the Presbyterian tradition is too wide. Does that mean anything goes? Does “come as you are” mean you can get away with anything and there are no perimeters? Are there no standards for acceptable behavior? How do you decide right and wrong? Excellent questions! Yes, there are some absolutes, some certainties – and I’m going to talk about those for the next six weeks in worship. The certainties of God’s loving grace. And next week, I’m going to preach about our core beliefs, helping each of us to define our core beliefs. But I will outline just a few right now.

First, absolutely, God loves you. God loves everyone.

Second, You are called to love God and love others.

The rest of my absolutes are not in any particular order. But core faith beliefs that are central to me and to most Presbyterians. Jesus is first and foremost. – The way we say that in the church is Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the Conscience and head of the church. In other words, you must stay true to what you belief to be true of Jesus. No king, no government, no friend, no pastor, no church is more important than Jesus. We believe in the Sovereignty of God. In other words - God is in charge. God is ruler of our world and should be ruler of our lives. We know God in Trinity – Father Creator, Son Jesus and Holy Spirit. The Bible is the unique and authoritative witness to that truth of God the trinity and particularly to the life of Jesus Christ. We each are called to be in relationship with Jesus Christ – to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. We each are called to serve God and share our gifts responsibly.

When you join a Presbyterian church there are very few requirements, but there are very many expectations. The requirement is that you love God and promise to serve Jesus. The expectation is that loving and serving will have shape and form, action and intention. The way you serve will fit you and it will shape your life. How you love God and others will be different than how I do it. But we all promise to do it – to love God and to love others. In the Presbyterian Church there is something called the Rule of love. That means we measure everything we do by love. - Love is the measure. Love is the measure of how we live. Love is the measure of how we make all decisions. Love is the measure of all our actions. Love God. Love others. In so loving may we be blessed. By the grace of God.

Psalm 133:1

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

Matthew 5:9

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Galatians 3:26-29

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Ephesians 2:13-22

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.