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 Westminster Presbyterian Church, Albany, NY
 August 14, 2011

Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Being Multicultural Part 2: To Seek Justice

For those of you keeping track, this is part 2 in my sermon series on being a multicultural church. Two weeks ago, my topic was “who are we?” and we discussed the history of churches in South Africa as well as our own involvement in Ghana.

This week, my title “to Seek Justice” is from Micah 6:8. “And what does the Lord require of you but to seek justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” I have taken some artistic license here, because I’m not, in fact, preaching on that text. But I do want to consider our life together as a multicultural church and how seeking justice is a part of that.

I should say as a caveat, that this series focuses quite a bit on cultural, racial and linguistic differences. But, all of the points I make about coming together across these differences can be applied to other circumstances as well: differences of region, of opinion, of income, etc. For our purposes, I will focus on issues raised in a culturally varied environment such as our own.

I admit when I came up with the idea for this series, I struggled with what to call it. I settled on “Being Multicultural” because it emphasized who we already are as a church and how we settle into our new identity.

But, I also struggled with the word “multicultural.” It is an imperfect word. “Multicultural” can mean many different things depending on who you ask, so I was reluctant to use it in this context because what I mean by being multicultural may not be what everyone else understands. One author, Robin Kelley, even suggests a

new term, “polycultural” to incorporate the idea of polyrhythms that play off of one another and blend into a beautiful sound.¹ But, I digress...

We have been a country of many cultures from the beginning. What has changed over the years is how we address our differences. One popular cultural image is that of the melting pot.

The melting pot idea is that new immigrants leave their previous cultural heritage behind in favor of a new American identity. Israel Zangwill provides an example of the melting pot idea in his 1932 play of the same title, “America is God’s crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming. ... God is making the American.”²

First of all, I think it’s interesting that Zangwill’s melting pot only has Europeans in it. To a certain extent his observation is true – there are cultures here that are uniquely American. I don’t speak German, for instance, even though my ancestors who came to this country did. After several generations, that part of my family’s identity no longer continued to be a part of us.

Throughout our history immigrants have come from all over the world and joined a new environment here. The idea of the melting pot is that the previous culture is melted down and blended to create an entirely new identity.

I do admire the rather romantic idea of all peoples joining together to become American. There does, however, seem to be more to it than that, more than just not speaking German anymore. The melting pot implies that the previous culture from the “old world” is, well, old and should be cast off like an old set of clothes. Then, the new clothes, which are better, will be put on.

But, what if someone’s experience is different. What if there is someone who doesn’t want to lose all their connection to their ancestral heritage? What happens when the new American identity doesn’t seem to have room for them? What if the clothes don’t fit?

It is a noble and truly American desire to unite across differences. I applaud that. Uniting is different from being the same. If you think about it, how can all people be the same? How could we even wish for all people to be the same? Yes, we are all equally valuable in God’s eyes. Yes, we all have equal rights under the laws of this country.

Yet when I hear expressions that we are all the same, it makes me think that if I am different somehow, I have to change in order to become the same. Let me give you an example.

¹ Robin Kelley, “People in Me, ‘So What Are You?’” (ColorLines, Winter 1999. Updated 5 July 2003), <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=3865> Cited 12 August 2011.

² Israel Zangwill, *The Melting-Pot* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1932), 33.

I am from Oklahoma, my parents and family still live there. Now, I'm told I don't have that much of an accent. But, pretend I did. Pretend I have a strong southern accent that just won't go away. I may feel self-conscious being up north with my accent and worried that people will treat me differently. Maybe sometimes they do. What if I was treated differently to the point that I didn't feel I really belonged here? I might not relate to being "the same" when I clearly feel so different, so out of place.

We all have our differences, whatever they may be. Surely we can support one another in our differences without losing our accents. Surely I don't have to reject my accent, to cast off my heritage like old clothes in order to call myself an upstater.

Unity is distinct from uniformity: one involves changing the essence of who one is in order to conform, the other leaves room for the self to stay intact while reaching out in unity with others.

Here's where justice comes in. Since these differences exist, how do we respond to differences and to inequalities that exist around these differences?

For insight, I turn to the best place I know to learn about people coming together across cultural and racial differences – Paul's letters.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul addresses a community that, like many other fledgling Christian communities, is divided along lines of Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. In seeking unity, Paul uses the image of the Body of Christ again and again in his letters.

Both Paul and the Romans know that living in community is hard. There are different customs and beliefs, eating habits and religious rites. Sometimes there is bickering or hostility. Some differences are just pushed to the side and not talked about – perhaps wishing that they would just go away.

Paul refuses to solve these problems through traditional means, by setting up a hierarchy or putting strict rules in place. No, instead he talks about the Body of Christ.

We are one body that has many parts. Paul says that we are different and it's ok to acknowledge differences among us.

V. 4 "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function"

Then Paul launches into a list of gifts to show different ways we all serve the Body, different ways we all worship God.

"⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."

Why would he go to the trouble of listing these different gifts unless the Christians in Rome equated success with sameness, with one way of doing things, one set of gifts. They weren't comfortable with everyone being so different. In fact, the differences were dividing them.

But, instead of running away from their differences and pretending they don't exist, Paul encourages the Romans to live into their differences, to embrace a list of different gifts, to live as the body.

What I am describing is not a surface level of diversity. It would be easy to conclude that embracing our differences would lead to over-emphasizing them. Imagine what it would be like if we became so obsessed with racial and cultural identity that we saw the race before the person, that we sought diversity just to seem politically correct.

No, the diversity I am describing is one of genuine sacrifice and care for one another. It is a matter of justice to notice that there is *already* room for all at the table and that we can join together to fight inequality.

Listen to Paul in verse 5 -

V. 5 "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

We who are many are members one of another! We belong one to another! That is the kind of diversity that is profound. One that is based on individual one on one relationships, that takes a lot of listening and understanding.

We may be different, but that is not something to overcome, or overemphasize, we can celebrate how different we are and that we are united. Our practices of listening and unity are the main ways that we fight inequality – beginning with ourselves and our one on one relationships then extending that out into our wider community.

As we answer God's call to justice, we live into Paul's words not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed.

Verse 2 – "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds"

How will our community here on State Street be different? How will we as a church create a new reality that we take with us when we leave these walls?

This is the justice we seek:

We seek a justice that intentionally reaches out to those who are different, to those who are excluded.

We seek a justice that listens to people when they express their historical and cultural differences.

We seek a justice that fights for an end to racial and cultural inequalities in our community and in our world.

We seek a justice that sees a person as an individual beyond any outside definition placed on them.

This is the justice we seek, this is the community we are building in this place

Believe these words, my friends,

“We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” (Romans 12:5)