

Alive: Spirit of Unity and Diversity Ephesians 4:1-6

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Years ago, when I was serving Our Savior's Lutheran Church in Faribault, Minnesota, I had the opportunity to lead a bible study at the Minnesota Correctional Facility. On the first Tuesday evening of each month, I'd walk into the front entrance as the large doors closed behind me. As I said hello to the staff, I'd hand over my keys and my wallet, empty my pockets, take off my belt and let the guards look through my backpack. I'd then move through several levels of security as each set of doors would close behind me. Finally, on the inside, I'd gather with the residents; we'd check in with one another, sing songs together, study scripture, and close the evening by sharing communion. Each time communion concluded, I would speak words that many of you will recognize: "In this sacrament, God renews, restores, and reconciles us as the body of Christ, and sends us out in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the good news of the risen Christ." And all those guys would shout, "Amen!"

There was something about the way they'd say "Amen!" Some said it as those who didn't understand those words but wanted to. Others said it but really thought that it was likely true for someone else. Still, others heard it, and desperately wanted it to be true for them. It was a mix of all three of those for Jim.

As I was packing up to leave one evening, Jim came up to me and asked if I had a couple of extra minutes. Sure, I said. Jim wondered about those words I had used to describe what God was up to in communion. He wanted to understand how God renews, restores, and reconciles us as the Body of Christ..." Jim told me that he was handed a very different image of a God as he grew up. The God Jim was introduced to a God who accused, judged, and condemned. Life in the context of his family reflected all of those things. It seemed he was constantly being accused of something. The circles he ran in judged him harshly; people were quick to condemn him when he didn't fit in, make the grade, and follow the plan. As Jim came of age, he also came to know a God who – it seemed

to him, was just waiting for him to mess up so that he could be reminded of how bad he was as a human being and that at the end of the day or at the end of his life – whatever came first, he was worthless. The irony of how his understanding of God had become a framework for his whole life was not lost on him. As we sat together that night and all of the Tuesday nights that followed, I watched how the power of resurrection began to bring him back to life. Jim was being freed from the oppression of accusation, judgment, and condemnation. Jim was discovering a new image of God who renews, restores, and reconciles us as the body of Christ.

We're in a worship series that we're calling "Alive." Through these summer weeks, we're exploring how the resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit fuels a movement in the world that comes alive through us. This week we're focusing on what it means to be alive with the Spirit of Unity and Diversity, but I have to tell you that there's a big twist in this. I want us to think about the unity that we share in the grace and love of God and the rich diversity of how God's grace and love is expressed through each of us to be the renewing, restoring, and reconciling presence of Christ in the world. All of this is rooted in a passage in the book of Ephesians 4:1-6 (NLT).

¹ Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. ² Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. ³ Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. ⁴ For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.

The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

God Renews

In verse 1, Paul describes how renewal begins: "Here's what I want you to do ... I want you to get out there and walk—better yet, run!—on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere." Paul notes that we make the road of renewal by walking "the holy road." When we walk that road, we model a relationship

with a God who renews for others. And not much is more important than that. God wants to renew our understanding of who God is and what God is up to in our lives. But there's a tension here. So many people carry the images of God with them each day, rooted in ancient Greek and Roman tradition. I didn't have to look any further than at my young friend, Jim, in the orange jumpsuit. The many Greek and Roman gods of ancient tradition were, if we're honest, a gang of overgrown adolescents who had more power than moral maturity. They were competitive and egotistical projections of human nature, glorious and gracious one minute, vindictive and cruel the next. But God wanted to renew all of that. Imagine the shift when we understand our source and identity not as a rival gang but as a loving community.

My young friend, Jim, was given an empty, warped view of a community of people empowered by fear and force. I sometimes wonder how it is with many of us. What were we handed when we were being shaped? Could it indeed be that God is leading us beyond violence into compassion and understanding, calling us into more profound unity, bringing people into a commonly shared identity as children of a loving God? Could it be that there is a God whose love and grace are as wildly beautiful and diverse as the people on this planet? And that instead of ruling by instilling fear, making threats, and crushing the noncompliant, we are offered a new and diverse view of God as a loving, caring parent/father/mother who comes as a gentle, healing, empowering Spirit, descending upon us like a dove? God continually renews us, leading us into a deeper unity powered by the rich diversity of how that grace and love are expressed through us. God renews.

God Restores

It seems odd to say it this way, but God is "in the business" of restoring. That's what God does. That's what resurrection does. God restores what was once dead and brings it back to new life. So when my young incarcerated friend Jim began to trade his understanding of a God who accuses, judges, and condemns for a God who renews and reconciles, his life began to be restored. He told me later that he could hardly wait to share this new and diverse understanding of God, who was filled with love and grace, mercy, and compassion for him, with his friends. It was contagious. His friends began coming to our little bible study. What once seemed utterly impossible was now playing out right in front of their eyes. It was restoration.

So let me ask you this: What situation in your life seems impossible right now? Is it the strained relationship with that friend or family member you haven't talked to since the 4th of July last year? Do you think God can restore that? There's a unity there that God is after. I may not be so excited about that, but God is "in the business" of restoring. And if God wants to restore that relationship, God will also provide the way. We just get to be open to that possibility.

God Reconciles

God is reconciling the whole creation. That is to say that God is putting back together that which has been stretched apart and broken by our attempts to segment and categorize people, our thinking, our attitudes, and our viewpoints. I think we can be honest that we've been locked up in our old familiar dualistic thinking for a long time. God wants to help us move beyond the "us-them," "we-they," and "in-out" thinking that is so readily our default mode. Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who talks about an entire group of people, perhaps putting them down, lumping them all together, characterizing them less generously, and thinking to yourself, "Wow! I know someone they're talking about, and I don't see them that way!" As the Spirit begins to move through us, God gives us the courage to speak into that, to have gentle, respectful conversations that have the uniting power to reconcile mine and yours into ours. When we embrace God's beautifully diverse love and grace for all people, "one" and "other" are transformed into "one another." "Same" and "different" are harmonized without being homogenized or colonized. "Us" and "them" are united without loss of identity and without dividing walls of hostility. God does that when God reconciles us with one another; God brings us together in a beautiful unity known as a beautiful diversity.

Friends, God is asking, calling, and equipping us for the movement of the Spirit through us where we continue to live, learn, and grow so that the hostile one-versus-other-ness of Earth can become more like the hospitable one-another-ness of heaven, right here, right now. From beginning to end, the Spirit leads us into a vibrant diversity and joyful unity, which brings about a profound harmony.

So how do we make this sticky? I've written a 5-day devotional for you to use this week. Beginning tomorrow and moving right through the week, I'll challenge you to ask yourself some questions: What does God want to renew in you? What does God want to restore through you? What does God want to reconcile in spite of you?