

Last Sunday evening, I flipped on the TV just as Oprah Winfrey began moderating a segment on the premier of 60 minutes called “Divided.”<sup>1</sup> In this segment, 14 people from the state of Michigan were brought together to check in on the state of the union 8 months after one of the most contentious and bitter elections in our country’s history. The 14 people represented a cross-section of voters -- a diverse group that included a farmer, a drug counselor, a speech therapist, a former GM factory worker, and a sales manager. Seven had voted for President Trump and 7 had not. Half had voted their party line, and half not. The conversation was tense and intense. Perhaps the only thing the group agreed about was that Trump should be more cautious and judicious in his tweets. Other than that, there was no common ground.

At the end of the segment, Oprah asked them if they thought conversations like these matter and what they thought the country would be like four years from now. Just about everyone agreed that conversations like these mattered AND they feared that it would be the same or worse in the future. One woman, Laura, went so far as to say, “Unfortunately as wonderful as this [conversation] has been, I think we’re gonna be just as divided. I’m even fearing civil war.” As she said this, many heads, if not most, around the table were nodding in their agreement about her fears. Another participant, Paul, said, “We gotta come together and find a way. But I’m hopeful for the future...Just sitting around this table’s showing me this tonight...” 60 Minutes ended the segment by saying that after three hours the conversation continued at a nearby restaurant late into the night. Since then many members have kept talking, both online and in person, while just recently five people from the group went to a shooting range to try to understand each other’s views on gun rights.

This divided nature of this group is in line with what the research has been showing over the last 10 years. In his book, *The Big Sort*, Bill Bishop argues that we’ve become geographically, politically and even spiritually sorted into like-minded groups in which “we silence dissent, grow like-minded in our thinking, and consume only facts that support our beliefs - making it easier to ignore evidence that our positions are wrong.” As a result, Bishop writes, “we now live in a giant feedback loop, hearing our own thoughts about what is right and wrong bounced back to us by the television shows we watch, the newspapers and books we read, and the blogs we visit online, the sermons we hear, and the neighborhoods we live in.”<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, this sorting only seems to be getting more strident, something Brené Brown delves into in her latest book, *Braving the Wilderness*. She writes, “In 1976, less than 25

percent of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. In other words, we lived next door to, and attended school and worshiped with, people who held different beliefs than ours. We were ideologically diverse. In contrast, in 2016, 80 percent of US counties gave either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton a landslide victory. Most of us no longer even live near people who are all that different from us in terms of political or social beliefs.”<sup>3</sup> One would think that all this sorting would lead to deeper sense of connection as we surround ourselves with like-minded people, but in fact the opposite is true. While sorting has increased, Brené found, so has the experience of loneliness, with over 40% of people in the United States reporting feeling lonely and experiencing an absence of meaningful social interaction.<sup>4</sup>

The state of affairs in which we find ourselves today stands in stark contrast to Paul’s teaching in his letter to the Philippians, a letter that is all about unity and togetherness and fellowship. A letter that is all about being of the same mind, having the same love, and being in full accord, not by sorting all the diversity and disagreement out of the community, but by taking on the mind of Christ.

For Paul what it means to take on the mind of Christ is best understood through the language of a hymn that was circulating orally among the various Christian communities of the time. It was a hymn that the Philippians might have been familiar with – that might have been a part of their regular worship together. It is one that we now know as the Christ hymn.

“Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross.”

For Paul, it seems the key to unity, togetherness, fellowship - the key to this oneness in mind, heart and spirit, lies in the trajectory of the life of Christ -- the trajectory that took him from equality with God to one who emptied himself, divested himself his divinity to be born into a human life and to die human death. The key, for Paul, lies in a trajectory of humility.

Now, I don’t know about you all, but I struggle a bit with the notion of humility. I know it’s good to be humble, and I try not to have an over-inflated sense of myself or my importance, because that is, after all, what it means to be humble, but at the same time it’s a little too entangled with the idea of being lowly. Humble and lowly. It always bothered me that Mary, the

mother of Jesus, the mother of the Word incarnate, the mother of God, is often referred to as pure and lowly, as if to keep her in her place. Humble and low.

What’s important to understand, however, is that Paul isn’t talking about humility in the sense of shrinking and making ourselves smaller. It’s not about capitulation or rolling over and playing dead. It’s not about submission in the sense of losing yourself to the definition and determination of others. It’s not about self esteem or self abnegation.

It is about remembering who we are - we are of the earth - humus - remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return - earth to earth - ashes to ashes - dust to dust. It is about remembering who we are in relation to God, to ourselves, and to every other living person on the planet. It is about emptying ourselves of the need to be better than, more important than, greater than, righter than any other living person on the planet. It is about divesting ourselves from ideologies, structures, systems, and earthly entanglements that situate ourselves over and against any other living person on the planet.

Humility is about community. Humility is about unity and fellowship and togetherness. Humility is about love. Humility is about belonging.

Every time we gather at St. Andrew’s, it occurs to me that we find ourselves in something of an “unsorted” territory -- at least politically and ideologically. We are hardly of one mind in that regard as we bump up against the sharp edges of our diversity and difference. But we aren’t called to have a meeting of “our” minds, we aren’t called to agree according to our ways of thinking and being. We are, Paul reminds us, to meet in the mind of Christ as members of his body in the larger household of God - a household which is most definitely unsorted territory. A household where there is unity and fellowship and togetherness not in spite of but because of our diversity and difference in the mysterious way of God.

Paul reminds us to meet in the mind of Christ, where we can bring our diversity and difference, where we can bring our deepest held convictions and all that we think we know to be true and right and proper, where we can bring our whole complex and complicated selves, where we can bring our whole beings, but where we are meant to bring them in humility. Paul reminds us that we make our joy complete, when we remember who we are as Christ followers, and humble ourselves Christ humbled himself even to the point of death.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” Paul writes. “Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/post-election-is-the-u-s-still-a-nation-divided-oprah-winfrey-reports/>

<sup>2</sup> Brown, B. (2017). *Braving the wilderness: The quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone*. Pg. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, 51.