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Dr. Brad Monroe

A Wonderland Theology

1 Corinthians 12:14-20 and John 13:31-35

“Abortion stops a beating heart!” “My body, my choice!”

“Executing a murderer is justice!” “Murder by the State is still murder!”

“Indecency over the airwaves!” “Wardrobe malfunction!”

We live in a world of narrowcasting. We live in a world of 1000 talk radio programs but no true conversation. We live in the world of the information superhighway but where the sharing of that information through true dialogue drives on unpaved, county roads. In this world, sloganeering has replaced thoughtfulness in the arena of moral discourse. In a world of narrowcasting, being the Body of Christ is difficult.

Yet my experience as a pastor has long led me to suspect the Kingdom of God is a strange and wondrous place, a place where people of odd beliefs somehow find a way to love each other. A place where people of differing opinions break through the cacophony of narrowcasting to find a unity that cannot be broken even by the combined forces of Facebook, Twitter, Fox News and MSNBC!

A few months ago I visited with Celebration of Life for their 40th anniversary and folks were telling stories and sharing their memories. One woman told of how at the age of 19 she began her rather long “sabbatical” from church. Years later, as a mother of an eight year old, her daughter was watching the Care Bears. The daughter came in and told mom about how Papa Bear is God and.... “Uh-oh,” thought mom, “I need to deal with this.” Mom wasn’t even sure she believed there was a God, but still she prayed, “God, if you really exist, you need to step in here and help.” Mom opened the phone book and saw Celebration’s ad and thought, “Hmm, I guess I’ll try them.” It was at that first worship service that God spoke to her heart. It was after that first worship service that the fellowship of Celebration surrounded her and her daughter with God’s love. The mom has never looked back, and she and her daughter move forward in Christ.

Two days later I was invited to a dinner to hear a guy named Reggie McNeal, a Southern Baptist who writes books on missional ministry; the dinner was sponsored by eight, large, self-

defined, evangelical congregations in Tucson. I listened with interest bordering on amazement as this Southern Baptist called these evangelicals not to worry about building up their churches but to be concerned with helping Tucson find “abundant life” through promoting good education for all children and affordable healthcare for all families. “Hmmm,” I thought to myself, “Now this is interesting. I go to the liberal church and hear personal testimony and go to the conservative gathering and hear a call to social witness.” The Kingdom of God is a strange and wondrous place.

I like what Tony Campolo says about our theological divisions. Tony says, “Let’s get this straight. Jesus would not be an Elephant, nor would he be a Donkey. Jesus is far more conservative than the most steadfast traditionalist and he is far more liberal than the most out-there radical.” One of my favorite Tony-isms is his argument for why we need each other: “Conservatives draw lines that should never be crossed; Liberals erase lines that should have never been drawn.”

It has always been so, has it not? In the beginning of the narrative arc we know as salvation history, God chose a pagan to be the father of monotheistic belief. In the shadow of mighty Egypt and its God-man Pharaoh, God chose a small, stiff-necked people. God used the echo of Caesar’s political power play to bring a peasant couple to the place of prophecy where would be born one who would become an itinerant preacher of some renown; Caesar, who was called Lord and God, would be overthrown not from above but from below. The Kingdom of God is a strange and wondrous place.

It strikes me that, as Presbyterians, we like to argue; it is in our DNA. What do you get when you have nine Presbyterians in a room together? Fourteen opinions! Yet, for every time Jude tells us to “contend for the faith,” Paul tells us to “have this attitude in you that was also in Christ Jesus.” For every time Paul talks about believers being “like-minded,” nineteen times does he command us with a “one another”: encourage one another (1 Thes. 5:11), teach one another (Col. 3:16), whatever grievances you have against one another, forgive as the Lord forgave you (Col. 3:13), submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21), speak to one another using psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19), be kind and compassionate to one another (Eph. 4:32), bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2), serve one another (Gal. 5:13), greet one another (2 Cor. 13:12), agree with one another (1 Cor. 1:10), instruct one another (Rom. 15:14), accept one another (Rom. 15:7), stop passing judgment on one another (Rom. 14:13), love one another (Rom. 13:8), live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16), honor one another (Rom. 12:10), be devoted to one another (Rom. 12:10). What would happen if we obeyed these words of Scripture? Could it be that the Kingdom of God would spring up even among us?

Or what would happen if we started to take more seriously the words of our Lord Jesus? It strikes me that Jesus never said that the only view his followers could have on abortion was to be against it in all circumstances; nor did he say that to restrict abortion rights is to oppress women. What Jesus said was love one another. Jesus never said that the appeals process for

death row inmates simply takes too long; nor did he say that the use of lethal injection amounts to cruel and unusual punishment. What Jesus said was love one another. Jesus not only never said, but probably never even conceived the possibility of the phrase “wardrobe malfunction.” But Jesus did say, and did conceive the possibility, that his followers would love one another. I am not saying that we are all the same, but we are much more similar than most of us imagine. Nor am I saying we must all agree with one another, but I am inviting us to embrace one another as brothers and sisters. Even more: I am inviting us to cultivate a spirituality of respect as a key mark of our fellowship together, that we may live in the land where is found what this world desperately needs to see: the strange and wondrous place that is the Kingdom of God.