

# “All The Colors”

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**To the reader:** This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

# “ALL THE COLORS”

READING (Matthew 14)

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.’ Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’ They replied, ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.’ And he said, ‘Bring them here to me.’ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

\* \* \* \* \*

SERMON

Listen for the resonance! That’s what I told you last year. People say they want to have more spiritual lives, but what does that mean? I believe it means being more deeply connected to what really matters – the deepest truth within connecting to the highest truth of the world out there. And the way we do that is to listen for the resonance, those moments when an image or an idea in our minds bounces off other images or ideas, as striking a note on the piano makes other strings vibrate along with it. With that in mind let’s go.

So Paula Roelands, our director of Beyond Sunday Shared Ministries, tells me last month that she wants to hold a “fair” to promote the program. Each district will have a ‘booth,’ she said, to present itself and invite people to get together. A lot of members still do not quite understand what it is we are doing, that our congregation is organized into geographic districts, six of them, named for each color of the rainbow, except indigo. Could I mention it from the pulpit?

My ear quivered. Last year, when I was very new, I noticed how we used the rainbow motif to represent our diversity of members. Each district is a color, which together form the rainbow, an ancient biblical image of peace and harmony. But I also know that the rainbow means a larger diversity, starting with Jesse Jackson’s political Rainbow Coalition and more recently and recognizably as a sign of welcome and support for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community.

The message we were sending inside the church was the same one we need to send out there – Everyone Belongs. In the church it means every member has some-

thing to give. Out there in world it means the same thing, only there we find organized resistance whereas here there is not. Lots of people out there think LGBT folks do not quite belong. Some still think people of color do not quite belong. Last year we saw plenty of people saying immigrants to do belong. Judging by the way we spend public funds, the poor, the young, and the sick do not quite belong either. What is simple for us to say and do is very hard for the world to do.

And so I said last year that we need to be more public about our belief that everyone belongs. Because if we only say it to ourselves while others do not hesitate to sort sheep and goats in public, then what good are our values? Our high school group, Fountain Club, took this up and created the Diversity Stake, those wooden stakes painted in the rainbow, which they invited you to place in your front yard and declare your personal 'stake' in the rainbow ideal. Paul Arnold, artist that he is, created this larger one which I place here every week to remind us that we as a congregation need to show our stake in the rainbow vision.

Now it's time to go back to that first resonating image, Beyond Sunday Shared Ministry, because this is where we live the idea. If we do not live by the principle that everyone belongs because everyone has something to give, then we cannot honestly proclaim it. Until we walk the walk here, we cannot talk the talk there.

Simply saying everyone belongs by itself is not enough. It's no better than poor Rodney King imploring us all to get along, a version of what people call holding hands and singing "kum ba yah." In seminary we call it cheap grace. They all mean the triumph of feeling over doing good, our tendency to judge religion based on personal feelings more than our collective dealings. To put it bluntly, we tend to think religion is an emotional state to be cultivated, not a moral state to be activated.

Which brings me to soup. I especially love lentil soup, like the Greek form called faki, which is flavored with balsamic vinegar. Yum. I also love an Egyptian lentil dish called kushari, which is a stew of lentils and rice seasoned with cumin and browned onions and often a dollop of sour cream. Double yum. Tradition says lentils were the dish Jacob cooked to tempt Esau to sell his birthright. Famished from a poor hunt, Esau was easily lured to 'sell his birthright for a mess of pottage.' Ever since, anyone who yields on principle for a small price is said to have sold it for a 'mess of pottage.'

How many of us are selling our priceless spiritual liberty for a mess of pottage? All of us. We all tend to settle for a bowl of warm lentils – the warm and pleasant things like worship and music and fellowship – when religion if it really is about deep calling unto deep would goad us and cheer us and otherwise drive us to live more deeply, consciously, conscientiously. Now we all need nourishment, even lentils. But in the end, this church is not a restaurant where you can order what you like and send it back if it isn't exactly right. You not only come to eat the soup, you come to make it. That's what Beyond Sunday is about. It is where we take the good feelings and turn them into good deeds, try to live by what we think and feel.

And when it works, it's Stone Soup. The only really nourishing thing we have to offer is each other. Oh, this stuff here including the preacher, adds some spice to the mix, but the stuff that feeds you is beside you. Too often it takes the slick-sounding outsider like me, to trick you into bringing your bit of onion, your pieces of potato or

carrot, your pail of milk, your cabbage to the common pot.

What a shame. Because if you all really thought about it, the moments when the church really meant something was when you gave or received something from another member – the card or phone call, the casserole, the knowing smile or tender hug. Or when you worked side by side for a common cause. All this, every bit of it, is to help that happen. What good is liberal religion if it does not liberate us to serve – each other here, our neighbor or workmate, our city or country? The best soup is the one we all make and we all eat.

We need all the ingredients, the black pepper, the white salt, the orange carrots, the green cabbage, the yellow potatoes, the red pepper, the blue bowls and the purple table cloth. We need all the people, all the colors, for all to eat and all to be fed. If we can do this here, bring all our gifts to the common pot, imagine how people out there will respond. That's the church that means what it says. That's the church that really cares. That's the church that really is a church.

All the colors. We need all the colors.