

John 6:24-35
Ephesians 4:1-16
August 4, 2024

Miraculous Harmony

Sometimes it seems as though God enjoys playing jokes on people, by putting them in situations in which they are forced to get along or even work with others with whom they are least compatible. “Opposites attract,” they say, but sometimes it is nearer the truth to say that, “opposites divide.” Maybe there is no other way, for if *too* many people are gathered, the incompatibilities will be revealed.

Group dynamics is *hard* work, and a bit mysterious. Some of the best leaders and managers of things cannot explain how they bring together a large multifaceted project involving many people, especially if they don't have the benefit of the use of force.

Next Sunday evening at 5pm, we will meet for a song service featuring the hymns of Fanny Crosby. In learning about her life story, I have run across the parallel stories of some of the people with whom she collaborated. One of them was named William Bradbury.

He is known for composing the music to such hymns as Just As I Am, Without One Plea, My Hope Is Built On Nothing Less (On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand), Sweet Hour of Prayer, He Leadeth Me, O Blessed Thought, Savior, Like A Shepherd Lead Us, and (get this) Jesus Loves Me.

Bradbury was a musical innovator in many ways, not merely a composer, as if that is not enough, but a compiler of hymnals and a publisher of sheet music and a teacher, both of how to sing and read music with harmonies, and also of how to lead choirs and teach others to sing. He also had a side business manufacturing pianos. And he was the father of the children's choir movement in the churches.

At a church in New York called, The Broadway Tabernacle, he began a children's choir program that at its zenith included 1,000 children in one choir. One concert was described in the following way;

“The sight itself was a thrilling one. A thousand children on a gradually rising platform . . . about two-thirds of the class were girls, dressed uniformly in white with a white wreath and a blue sash. The boys were dressed in jackets with the collars turned up, something in the Byron style. Until the time of the commencement the chattering and buzzing of the children produced a rather amusing affect, although at times nearly deafening.

But at the first stroke of the pianoforte the noise and confusion instantly ceased, and were followed by a silence so perfect that the ticking of the clock could be heard by the whole assembly. At the second sound of the instrument all instantly arose, presenting a sight far more easily imagined than described.” Then they sang.

How does anyone carry it off, getting children, much less adults, to begin in such chaos and produce such harmony? As beautiful as a beautiful choir is, larger projects, such as the running of a multi-national corporation, or a massive military operation like the invasion of Normandy, or just keeping the power and water on, are more complex and difficult. The most complex and difficult part of the process is to coordinate the actions of all the people.

One of the realities that as believers we must face is that such harmony among people in the church has proved undoable, or if such unity prevails for a time, it is not sustainable for long. Divisions in the church of every kind imaginable have presented themselves from the very beginning when they couldn't negotiate the distribution of food to the widows fairly because they spoke different languages, or when they were faced with the questions of the Gentiles entering into the faith.

I am sure they said, "everybody is welcome," and meant it, but things got more complicated when "everybody," started showing up. Much of the time it just looks like chaos, but there have been moments of miraculous harmony.

Being the first Sunday of the month, it is Communion Sunday, and even there, the faithful have found ways to mess things up, with the debates about Transubstantiation and Consubstantiation and the Real Presence and can there be shared Communion across

confessional lines? Can there be actual communion at Communion time?

In today's world, the, "spirit of the times," is trending away from the direction of unity in favor of culture wars. Perhaps a message based on, "one faith, one Lord, one Baptism," is simply *bound* to encounter opposition, or derision, or perhaps simply be ignored.

The church's past as well as its contemporary manifestations bear witness against any realistic notion of widespread and lasting unity in the church. There are Christians on both sides of every issue and trend in the popular culture, from domestic politics and musical style down to harmless debates between Pepsi and Coke and which makes a better pet, dogs or cats.

An easier solution is to say that the unity implied in the gospel is only meant for parochial groups; political parties, denominational affiliations, teams, groups based on ethnicity, or social class or some other aspect of background of vacation . . . but it doesn't even take a closer look to see that unity cannot be found even in those places. Disunity, factions, is perhaps one of the results of human nature. We are destined to suffer it and any preacher who thinks otherwise is whistling dixie and out of touch with reality.

Surely the idea of something like unity must be taken more seriously than that. Not to mention the fact that if we don't take it seriously, we aren't taking the bible

seriously, we also fail to see the ways in which we are, or could be, unified, which is a miracle, and speaks to the grace of God among us, called to attention by the sound of the divine music, rising up together to sing in miraculous harmony.

On this day the world over, hundreds of millions of people will find their way into a church and participate in this ritual we call the Lord's Supper, which is first and foremost about communion with God, it must also be thought of as communion with all who participate in it; one Lord, the Bread of Life, feeding us all.

For at least a moment or two, we can set aside in our minds all that distinguishes ourselves from others, and see only Christ feeding, healing, nurturing, forgiving, loving us all.

Paul resorts to one of his old tricks from the Corinthian correspondence by introducing the idea of the body which has many parts that work together in a unified way. At first glance it may seem crazy that God could have such an idea, with all the differences found among people in the world, and with how stubborn and contrary we sometimes are. But we *are* called to see ourselves in that way. Listen again to how Paul characterizes it, describing the leadership in the church;

“So Christ himself gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

It is a grand vision, this unity, and we recognize that in its completed form, it is not an expectation within history (that keeps us grounded, keeps us from becoming too arrogant when things come together, and too disappointed when things do not), but is consistent with our hope along with the Resurrection of the Dead, which we anticipate, and the Redemption of the World.

Finally this, that whenever we do catch glimpses of miraculous harmony in earthly life, let us not be too giddy about what is only a partial, short-term experience, like the way the Olympics can make us envision the glory of the nations in the New Jerusalem, but rather see in these times a sign pointing us to heaven itself, and the harmony of life in the Kingdom there, and as an invitation to join the work of God in the world.

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