

"We Can See Dimly Now"  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
January 17, 2010  
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 26; 13:1-13

The famous thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, the love chapter, used so often at weddings, was not originally written for just two people, it was intended for a whole church full of people – a church full of people who were not getting along. Quite intentionally it follows the analogy in chapter twelve that compares the body of Christ to a human body made up of many different parts that all need each other. It's all part of an appeal to the Corinthian church that threatened to break up into factions. Over and over again, in as many ways as possible, Paul begs and pleads and cajoles that church to stay together. Not only that, but to celebrate its differences and work together in love. And at the end of his appeal, Paul says, with no small amount of humility,

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

On a weekend in which we celebrate our cross-cultural differences, humility is a necessary starting place. "For now we see in a mirror dimly." We are not all the way there yet. This church, good as it may be, is not the kingdom of God. There are some things to celebrate but there are also necessary next steps.

On this weekend in which we celebrate Martin Luther King's life and legacy, I re-read his "*I Have A Dream*" speech. It was delivered amidst a political struggle for voting rights in the nation's capitol. The situation was dire. Racism was tolerated and even celebrated. Poverty and the lack of power combined to create lasting ghettos and cycles of poverty and imprisonment – cycles that continue to play out. In 1963, many who longed for justice and dignity felt only despair, but King had a dream.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . .

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a *dream* today!

When King first spoke those words, it was often said that eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings was the most segregated hour in America. But the church is slowly catching up to America's diversity, and some congregations are even taking the lead. Here at Central, I am so proud to say that our children are growing up in a different world. Here, in our nursery and in our preschool class, and spreading all the way up,

children of different races and cultural backgrounds and different socio-economic statuses play together – and cannot imagine that it could be any different.

On this weekend as we remember the legacy not only of Martin Luther King, we also remember the legacy of Central member Stephen Ndumbe, who died this fall. Stephen came to Minnesota from Cameroon as a college student. And as long as he lived here he remembered, celebrated and shared his Cameroonian culture. His Cameroonian background was an important part of his faith and his life among us. Stephen's desire to share his culture with his church was an example to us and inspired others to share.

On this weekend, as we emphasize cross-cultural connections, we have some things to celebrate. People tell us that they feel genuinely welcome at Central. We do have considerable diversity within and among us. On the whole, we are curious, which is an underrated and important trait.

But we also have a long way to go to be a truly multicultural community of faith where all are celebrated and welcomed. If there is a scale from one to ten, with one being an all-white church and ten being a truly multicultural church, and maybe three being a white-dominated church that included some non-white people, we talked in small groups yesterday about where Central was on that continuum. And as we shared honestly, some areas for growth emerged. How we greet people makes people feel comfortable or not. One person asked, why can't we give hugs instead of handshakes? Someone else said that what they miss about music in church is that where they are from, you don't just hold a hymnal, you sing music to which you can clap and sway. You sing music, she said, with your whole body.

Speaking of songs you can dance to, there is an old song I like – I can't help but smile when I hear it, that begins:

I can see clearly now, the rain is gone,  
I can see all obstacles in my way  
Gone are the dark clouds that had me blind  
It's gonna be a bright (bright), bright (bright)  
Sun-Shiny day.

It's a great song, but it is not the right one for today. Paul tells us, no, all of the bad feelings have not yet disappeared, and we can not see all the obstacles in our way, for "now we see in a mirror dimly."

I think we are on to something good at Central. We are a downtown church, we do a pretty good job of welcoming all who enter. But we have a long way to go. Paul's reminder about seeing in a mirror dimly is a call to humility from within a diverse body - everyone has unique gifts and all are needed. And we have a long ways still to go to make all truly welcome and fully included in this part of the body of Christ.

Prejudice is an enduring part of human nature. We tend to extrapolate from our own experience and think everybody is just like us, or thinks like we do, or has similar

tastes, but our own background is only partial. And so we are called to take a hard, honest look at ourselves when we find ourselves feeling judgmental or superior. Here in America, and even in the church, we don't like talking about racism. On the whole, we like to think that it is an ugly chapter from the past that is now closed. But racism is prejudice plus power. And power and privileges have been built up for decades.

Yesterday, Maureen spoke about an old essay by a woman named Peggy McIntosh who wrote about white privilege being like an invisible backpack white people carry in America. Here are a few of the advantages she named.

- I can go shopping most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- If I move to a new neighborhood, I can be pretty sure my neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to me.
- I can choose bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.
- If a police officer pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

On this weekend, we must remember that racism has not been overcome. To help us, we can learn from churches in the post-apartheid era in South Africa. Not in a finger-pointing way that remembers racism from that context as their problem and not ours. But we can learn from the intentional efforts of many to overcome racism with reconciliation, to move forward without forgetting painful truths. We can learn from the Belhar confession, which we will say together shortly, which states that

[the] unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another . . . that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity.

It takes time to get to know people below the surface. It is not easy to live without prejudices and snap judgments about others. It takes time to get to trust one another. We need to work hard to live out that love which does not insist on its own way, to live out that love that is not irritable or resentful.

But that is what our faith compels us to do. To be the body of Christ. To walk with each other, to work side by side. To guard human dignity and save human pride. To be the body of Christ. To demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ that knows no bounds. And to share that love with a world in pain. May it be so. Amen.