

Making for home: A kinship of gifts

To the Ephesians and Philippians, to the Galatians and anyone who would listen, Paul's message was the same.

Sunday's Coming Premium

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When I was a child I spoke as a child, understood as a child, reasoned as a child. I knew my parents loved me best and assumed my several siblings all agreed. I mistook abundant love for especial favor and blessings for entitlements, and I took pride in things I ought to have been simply grateful for. I mistook good fortune for God's approval and worldly outcomes for the will of God. Kennedy won because God was on our side. When my grandfather died, I assumed it was me—something I'd done or failed to do. Maybe the first time I ate meat on a Friday, at Bobby Bacon's house. It was baloney.

I believed that ours was the one true faith and that I ought to disabuse my unenlightened neighbors of theirs. They said theirs was the way and truth and light. One even claimed to be chosen by God. We all called each other vile, hateful, childish names. "Bile and rancor," my mother called it and sent me off to see the priest. I was passionate and undismayed.

It is in childhood that we come by our identities—those elements of tribe and sect, people and place, race and creed and geography that tell us who we are, where we come from, to whom we belong. These identities align us with one crowd and separate us from others. In childhood we learn the power of naming and its perils. Irish Catholics, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Reform Jews, Sunni Muslims—this taxonomy makes safe the way for later variations: right-wing evangelicals, radical Islamists, secular humanists, Zionist Jews. This "naming and claiming" can be a comfort and scourge, the way both God and the devil inhabit details. The same for every baptism, every initiation ritual: it marks us as aligned with some and at odds with others.

So much of our experience is grounded in this “denomination”—this sorting and separating each from the other. It began in the garden and may never end. But whence comes the impulse to name one’s kind the blessed and elect while others become, by default, the savage or pagan, deluded or damned? These are the bittersweet fruits of identity politics: we are defined and divided by it. Google Baghdad, Belfast, Darfur or Detroit, the cities of men and of angels—sounding brass, tinkling cymbals, without charity.

One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas .”

So lamented Paul to the Corinthians, bedeviled in their own times by such divisions. He had been around this track with the church at Rome, where the locals wanted to quibble about circumcision. To the Ephesians and Philippians, Galatians and anyone who would listen, Paul’s message was the same: we are neither Jews nor Greeks, male nor female, Romans nor gentiles, slaves nor free; rather we are all God’s children and heirs to the kingdom, sharing as we do a kinship of gifts, neither earned nor deserved, but ours all the same—gifts of a kind all good parents give, to wit: faith, hope and, greatest among them, love.

There is something of Paul in what the president said at the National Prayer Breakfast this year:

The very nature of faith means that some of our beliefs will never be the same. . . . We subscribe to different accounts of how we came to be here and where we’re going next—and some subscribe to no faith at all.

But no matter what we choose to believe, let us remember that there is no religion whose central tenet is hate. There is no God who condones taking the life of an innocent human being. This much we know. . . .

There is one law that binds all great religions together. Jesus said, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” The Torah commands, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.” In Islam . . . “None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.” And the same is true for Buddhists and Hindus; for followers of Confucius and for humanists. It is, of course, the Golden Rule.

This apparition of unity in diversity, common ground shared by assorted people, simple, saving truth in a complex and perilous world, is one we too rarely get glimpses of. It asks us to put aside childish things; to see that we are in this together, that we all have strayed, all feast, all fast, all suffer and pray, all wander in the desert and want to get home to the God of our making and creation—who loves, thanks be to God, all creation, speaks all our languages, hears all our prayers or none of them.

When I became a man I put away childish things. It is a lifelong practice, rarely perfected. Some days I'm devout, some days devoutly lapsed. Still, there are times I get glimpses of it: of fellow pilgrims and suffering souls, the children of God all making for home.