

There's a church I know of that has had quite an amazing thing happen over the last eight years. It's a small Presbyterian church in the small town of Copperas Cove, TX. Eight years ago they had maybe 75-100 members on the rolls. Average attendance on Sunday was about 40 people. They loved one another, they were faithful and had long-standing traditions and generations of family had gone there, but they also knew that they couldn't afford a full-time minister and would likely need to close the church in a few years.

They were a predominantly white, middle class, older congregation. No youth program. No children.

But at the same time, on the other side of the world, a civil war broke out in a country called Cameroon. The western, English-speaking part of the country wished to secede and form their own country, separate from the French-speaking eastern part. Since then, over half a million people have fled Cameroon and countless thousands have died or been injured. The majority of those who have fled are from the English-speaking areas, and they have fled to English speaking places where they can more easily build new lives. There happen to be three places in the United States where large communities of Cameroonian refugees have settled - Massachusetts, Maryland, and Copperas Cove, Texas. The conflict in Cameroon is still going on today. Eight years later, but if you haven't heard of it until today, don't be surprised. The Norwegian Refugee Council has designated the conflict in Cameroon as the most neglected crisis worldwide based on "a lack of media attention and global political [indifference]."

Today, the First Presbyterian Church of Copperas Cove is 50% white and 50% Cameroonian. You can imagine how the church has completely changed. How the demographics of session and the worship committee and Christian education have changed. The church is busy and full of music and praise on Sundays. The foods during fellowship time are a blend of Texas dishes like barbeque and tortillas and African dishes like N'dole and fufu. There are children finding easter eggs and youth being confirmed.

But the church is also struggling. The financial needs of the church are great. The pledges have decreased since some original members have left because they were uncomfortable with the changes. The church has had to apply for grant money from the denomination just for upkeep on the church building.

The people who fled the war came with little to nothing. Many have PTSD from what they saw. They have family still there, living in constant danger. The pastor said to me one day that just before worship began, she was shown a graphic photograph on a cell phone of a deceased relative, and the person with the phone asked the pastor to help tell the victim's mother, who was sitting in the second row, about her son.

The new members have love and energy and faith, but they sometimes need assistance to navigate the immigration system or enroll children in healthcare and schools or pay for rent or groceries. The part time, stated supply, interim pastor who has been there for a decade, through it all, told me that she never expected to do what she is doing at FPC Copperas Cove. Of course not, ten years ago, the Cameroonians were living in Cameroon, in peace. She said to me, "They need a full-time pastor and a full-time social worker here, and I'm neither!"

I just found out this week that she's announced her retirement at the end of September. The church is both growing and failing at the same time. They need help.

In today's scripture, we actually have something similar. A church that is struggling as it's growing. It's struggling to blend a new group of Gentile Christians in with the Jewish Christians who started the church. They have different . . . everything. Different traditions, customs, foods, clothes, prayers, songs, rules, . . . everything.

It's never been easy to blend two groups of people in churches, or schools, or business, or politics.

I mean, don't get me wrong. The great part about Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit was that the apostles of Jesus Christ suddenly became great evangelists for Jesus. Billy Graham type preachers, brilliant thinkers, healers, foreign language speakers, theologians. And the church grew. Fast. Maybe too fast. So fast, that most of the scriptures after Pentecost are about the tensions that arose when two different cultural groups started to worship together.

The Jewish Christians wanted to keep the traditions of Judaism and worship Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. They wanted to keep dietary laws, the Sabbath laws, and then there was the matter of circumcision, too. And the Gentile Christians wanted to worship Jesus without all those Jewish customs. It made for tension. Hostility is the word in our scripture for today. There was hostility in the church.

You might be thinking to yourself, gosh, it sounds impossible. Wouldn't it be easier on everyone if they just had two different churches? Wouldn't that have saved everyone a lot of trouble?

That's a very human response. It sure beats all the hostility Ephesians alluded to. Arguments about blending two cultures into one church. What language do we use? What scriptures? What songs? What time? What day? What to eat during fellowship time? What holidays to celebrate? Circumcision? Baptism? So many ways to disagree. Truly, it would be easier to appease everyone by just having two different services, right?

I once saw a church sign that took this idea to the extreme. It was outside a church called St. Arnold Community Church that said, "Classic Service 8 a.m. Contemporary 9 a.m. Mid Century Modern 10 a.m. Post Modern 11 a.m. Boomer Service at noon. Millenials at 1 p.m. Live Streamed Service at 2 p.m. and Happy Hour Service at 4 p.m.!

If that sounds good to you, and trying to incorporate diverse worship styles into one service makes you squirm and sympathize with the earliest Christians, consider this question. What do you imagine worshipping God in heaven is like? I somehow can accept an absence of time as we know it; that God exists outside of time and space, which is a good thing, because I imagine, in order to please the vast majority of people, you would

have to have more than 24 hours in a day to squeeze in all the different types of worship services to meet everyone's different needs. Maybe you'd start with a Quaker service. That's a service of quiet meditation in which we sit in silence and anyone may speak if they feel the Spirit leading them to say something, but it's primarily a simple thought followed by more silence. And then you can have services with slow and sleepy liturgies for those who like to stay calm as they worship. For the Church of Christ folks, you have to put away the instruments and cover the piano keys. Just beautiful harmonies are allowed in that service. You have to have communion for the Catholics and Episcopalians and Lutherans, but put it away for the Baptists. They only take communion four times a year. Then, when everybody's fully caffeinated . . . (they have caffeine in heaven, right? All the mega churches have their own coffee bars these days.) Then, we turn on the keyboard, fire up the piano, or organ and get the big choirs going. And finally, for those who like it loud, you get out the drum set and the amps and the mics and the guitars and rock the house of God with tear-jerkers that make you lift your hands and fall to your knees. You come in blue jeans for cowboy church and yoga pants for the contemporary service. You worship outside for the nature lovers and inside for those who are afraid of worshipping near bugs. You speak in tongues for the Pentecostals, and you do it all the day before for the seventh-day Adventists.

Do you imagine heaven is like that? Signs directing you to different sanctuaries to worship in different ways, or a schedule to let you know when *your* favorite type of worship will begin? The one you know *you'll* be the most comfortable at? No one acting in a way you find awkward in church? This way to the Biblical literalists. Over here for those who are tattooed and pierced. Queer and transgendered worshippers follow the Drag Queen to the left for Bible Study.

Or do you imagine that around the throne of God is the entire kingdom of God's family. Diversity of every imaginable kind. Sounds and voices and postures and emotions of all humanity, gathered together in a way that everybody is overjoyed to be a part of. That somehow, like at Pentecost, everyone hears worship and experiences worship in their own way that makes their soul rejoice.

It makes you wonder, doesn't it? What our souls are bound for as they head toward the throne of God. What diversity we are in for when we realize the kingdom of God.

Christians have fought about worshipping the way they are most comfortable for two thousand years. Churches have split over what type of music will be played, what communion looks like, what it's called, which ministers are allowed to preach, who is allowed to be married. It's still happening today. Churches are *still* splitting over these issues.

But the writer of Ephesians says, "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God."

Dunn's Corners has a long-standing set of customs and traditions. People who have been around for forty years or more know why this church does things the way they do, and when I ask why a particular thing is done in a particular way, I've heard that infamous phrase, "well, I don't know, but we've always done it that way."

But in case you're getting nervous, I have told several of you and I say it to you all now, it's not my intention to drastically change anything here, especially as we get to know one another. I'll say it again, session voted to have one service on Rally Day long before I arrived. I had no part in the decision. But if you feel like worshipping at a different time would be a frustrating inconvenience, imagine what the people of Ephesus went through when the Gentiles arrived, or what the people of Copperas Cove, Texas went through with the Cameroonians arrived and imagine, what would happen if one hundred and fifty new

members came here over the next ten years and brought their music, song, wardrobe, children, ideas, and needs. Would you be thrilled to see the children's ministry growing or would you be grumbling about traditions that were being modified?

The kingdom of God is a rainbow of race and gender and language and orientation and interpretation and wealth and education and political opinion. It's a big, messy, blended family, and the hard part for us to accept sometimes is that Jesus *intended* it to be that way. Holy Spirit continues to expand the diversity not decrease it. And as the head of the family, God invites us all to the feast and then laughs and sighs, and passes the mashed potatoes around the dinner table, knowing full well, there will be a food fight soon. It's inevitable, and, somehow, it's worth it. Thanks be to God that despite all the self-inflicted divisions and fights and condemnation we declare, as long as we follow Jesus, we're still family. Amen.