

Birds of a Feather

sermon digest

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1 John 1:1-7

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The removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina Capitol last week was truly historic. Denounced as a symbol of the war defending slavery, the flag was removed to a museum of Civil War history in the first Confederate state to secede from Union. Symbols are sometimes dismissed as existing only in the mind, while the reality exists in measured things and events. However, the power of symbols to affect human behavior should never be underestimated, just as the power of hatred or love to destroy or to enhance life should never be ignored. Our faith is anchored in the power of symbols, like the symbol of *word* that gives birth to deed. Thus, in John's Gospel the Word that brought forth the creation became flesh and dwelled among us. The Word acting in creation was the incarnate presence of God in Christ. Incarnation on a human scale continues. We continue the practice daily of giving flesh to words, words of hatred and destruction as well as words of hope and life.

W. A. Criswell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, traveled the South during the early Civil Rights Movement, claiming the same biblical support for racial segregation that had been used to justify slavery before the Civil War. He attributed the servitude of African people to the curse of Noah as a divinely ordained practice. In a 1956 address to the South Carolina Legislature, Criswell spewed his rhetoric: "The NAACP has got those East Texans on the run so much that they dare not pronounce the word 'chigger' anymore. It has to be Cheegro! Idiocy... foolishness! Let them integrate! Let them sit up there in their dirty shirts and make all their fine speeches. But they are all a bunch of infidels, dying from the neck up! Let them stay where they are... but leave us alone!" Criswell was said to have later repented of his racism, but in the 1980's a reporter asked why his church still appeared to be racially segregated. Criswell replied, "Birds of a feather. . . ."

There is truth in the proverb. Claimed as nature's justification of racial bigotry, the "birds of a feather" argument was based on the assumption that people of color are not fully human. Colonial Christians made similar arguments about native Americans, denying that Indians have souls. It seems that "Christian" slave owners had to view slaves as less than human in order to justify treating them like farm animals. Ironically, the plantation owners introduced slaves to the Christian gospel that affirmed the value of every person before God. The seeds of emancipation were planted by the very religion used to support slavery.

Dylann Roof, the young man arrested for killing nine people in the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, SC, told authorities he almost didn't go through with it because everyone was so nice to him. There, in an evening Bible study attended by a small Christian *koinonia* the powerful forces of hate and love collided. With the death of nine people, it appeared that hate won. But in the face of racist murders, the Christian love extended to a stranger in the church was carried forward in the spirit of forgiveness by the victim's families. The bond of love, *koinonia*, is proving to be greater than the call to racial war by a demented, twenty-one-year-old, terribly misdirected killer.

I have sometimes prayed the Pharisee's prayer, "God I thank Thee, that I am not as other men." What exactly separated the Pharisee from the Publican in the Gospel story? I have always felt some distance from the kind of hatred that infected Roof, but in my more honest moments of reflection on my roots, I realize that the attitudes that produced a Dylann Roof were available to me. I won't say, "There but for the grace of God," as if I have been elected by different surroundings to be a better person. I refuse to blame God for human evil. Rather, there but for the circumstances of life and the influence of a loving *koinonia* go I.

I offer no brief for the disgusting rationale that dehumanizes any race or group of people, but I have noticed our human tendency to gravitate toward groups of people with common opinions, similar life circumstances, and common economic resources.

The fear of racial integration did not work out the way many defenders of the status quo imagined, especially in churches. Churches continued to be racially segregated largely by choice. African-Americans were not so interested in joining our churches. Cultural identity proved to be a major factor in choosing one's community of faith. In fact, the history of church has been a long story of separations, divisions, and divorces of one communion from another. Just as we lean toward

friendship with people who share our language and culture, we lean toward churches that support and reinforce our values. Thus, we have learned to think of church always in the plural. There is no such thing as one universal Church, integrated, consistent, and totally united, although sensitive Christians find the divided churches to be a matter of confession and regret.

The International Council of Community Churches of which we are a part is the most racially integrated church body in America, dedicated to the prayer of Jesus, "That they may be one, as we [Father and son] are one." The Council has shown integrity in looking beyond the denominational and racial boundaries of separation, yet the human condition that divides churches continues to reside even in our body.

The koinonia of God is the tie that binds us in Christian love. The message lies at the center of our Covenant of Grace:

Having experienced the wonder of Christian love, our faith in God proceeds from the confession of early Christians, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). . . . We are striving to live out the calling of Christ, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Mt 22:37-38).

According to the Christ of the Gospels, the Great Commandment, the *Shema Yisrael*, does not stand alone. Love for God is inseparable from love for neighbor. The Prologue to John's First Epistle contains the most powerful statement of *koinonia* in the New Testament. It bears the same message as the Great Commandment of Jesus. The author, identified as John by later Christians, located the bond between Christians: the fellowship (*koinonia*) of Christians with the Father and the Son is integral to the fellowship (*koinonia*) between members within the Christian community. Like love and marriage, you can't have one without the other.

Koinonia is variously applied in the New Testament to fellowship, communion, sharing, the common ground among Christians—the feathers that cause us to flock together. Credit the author of 1 John for getting to the root of the matter. That is, the same tie between Father and Son in the gospel is the bond that holds us together as church. The salient word is love defined by God's saving grace, not to be confused with human, sentimental syrup that ignores the problems of the world or the stress in human relations. The unconditional love of God empowers the church to be church.

Augustine identified the dominate theme of this Epistle as *agape* love, love identified with the very nature of God. Some of the most powerful messages of Christian love are found in 1 John: God is love. You can't claim to love God and hate your sibling. Love originates in God; God initiates the love that we have for one another. If you abide in love, you abide in God, and God abides in you.

The strange occasion for this letter appears to be rooted in the problem of heresy threatening the peace of the church. The author spends almost as much energy on identity and condemnation of the false teachers as he does on the characteristics of the true faith. In similar fashion, the reading and interpretation of the letter often dwells on locating and rooting out the heretics of the church. But beyond heresy hunting, the positive agenda identifies the marks of the community of Christ, the church. Although the word church, the *ekklesia*, does not appear in the Epistle, the bond of the *koinonia*, the community of Christ, is obviously centered in love of God expressed toward one another. In a word, "they'll know we are Christians by our love." They will also know we have missed the boat by our divisions, prejudices, and hatred of people we call different.