

According to the standard Latin dictionary, the origin of the words 'hostility' and 'hospitality' share a common root, and that root - believe it or not - has to do with food. Let's start with the word hostility. The root of the word hos-TIS means 'to eat', 'to consume', or even 'to destroy'. Hos-PIS, on the other hand, is thought to be a compound, or union of hos-TIS along with the prefix pa, which when put together means 'to cause to eat', or 'to cause to feed'. That effectively makes hos-PIS mean 'the one who entertains another, often a stranger; basically a host that offers the hospitality of food and drink (HOSTILITY AND HOSPITALITY Panu Minkkinen).

It is fascinating to me that two diametrically opposite words can come from the same place. And it's equally fascinating that language can evolve such that hostility can become hospitality. If only the human heart, and the human will, were strong enough to pull off a transition like that in real time.

This letter of Paul's to the Ephesians says that the work of Christ is about making that very transition from hostility to hospitality. He says that the work of Christ is focused on taking down the great barriers of hatred and hostility that divide

people so that we can be one; one new humanity, from two opposing groups.

This is how peace is birthed into being. It is about creating a unity that allows us to feed one another rather than consume one another, and it is a work that is desperately needed in our world today.

Unity, in accordance with the Way of Jesus, is not about uniformity or even about agreeing with one another. Paul says in this letter to the Ephesians that Christ-like unity is about living together and communicating with one another without hostility. That is how we create a sacred dwelling place among us where God can live through the Spirit. And it is only possible because God offers us reconciliation through an overwhelming and all consuming love. God loves us completely just as we are, warts and all; and God asks us to do the same with each other.

The problem is, while we humans are eager to be united, we tend to do so as separate groups rather than as a whole. We unite with those who are most like us; those who think like us and look like us, and then we stand in unity against any who might be different. That's not real unity.

I think a large part of the problem is that we often get stuck in black and white thinking, or dualistic/binary thinking. Christian discourse in particular emphasizes good versus evil and right versus wrong which leaves very little room for the unknown. But, we are called to a more nuanced understanding of our faith and our relationships with others.

I recognize that there will be differences that make it extremely hard to engage in this way. American writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin said “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.” It’s much harder to talk to someone, let alone love them if they want to annihilate you. I don’t want to preach a simplistic sermon suggesting we can all get along if we just try a little harder. Unity in Christ requires effort, yes, but it often also requires change.

It also requires making healthy choices. In the Gospel reading this morning it seems clear to me that while Jesus and the disciples gave and gave and gave to others, their own needs were simply ignored by those they served. Their limits were not considered, and so Jesus says to them “Come away to a deserted place

all by yourselves and rest a while.” Jesus taught his followers the importance of having boundaries. Set a boundary, he said. Step back and take a minute. This is also an important element of unity and the art of communicating, without hostility. It requires setting limits and taking a minute when you are overwhelmed.

A book published last year called “How To Know A Person” by David Brooks is a good resource for this kind of work. Lianne bought it a few months ago and she left it lying around the house. I think she read it, but perhaps it was a not so subtle hint that I might benefit from what the author has to say. I think she may have hoped I’d pick it up and read it, which I did just this week. And it’s a very good book.

Brooks writes about the importance of social skills and how the “real act of...building a friendship or creating a community involves performing a series of small, concrete social actions well” including:

- Disagreeing without poisoning the relationship
- Revealing vulnerability at the appropriate pace

- Being a good listener
- Knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness.”

I’m still learning, after all these years, to do these things well. They are not easy. Especially when it involves a difficult topic, or difficult disagreement. Brooks suggests that the “official conversation is represented by the words we say about whatever topic we are nominally discussing...[BUT] the actual conversation occurs in the ebb and flow of underlying emotions that get transmitted as we talk. With every comment” says Brooks “[we] are either making [the other] feel a little more safe or a little more threatened. With every comment [we show] either respect or disrespect.” And here is the heart of his book. This one statement. He says that “There is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society...the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen...”

Paul’s vision of one humanity is not simplistic. It demands that we try to understand one another by avoiding polarized thinking and engaging in dialogue with those who hold different beliefs. In doing so, we move closer to the unity of

Christ – a unity built not on agreement, but on love, respect, and the recognition of our shared humanity.

Jesus had the ability to see people deeply and make them FEEL seen. In a world often divided by hatred and hostility, Christ's humility and sacrifice stands as a beacon of hope and reconciliation. His profound act of peace-making through self-giving is not merely symbolic; it is a tangible reality that we are called to embody. As followers of Christ, we are the living stones in this new edifice of unity, each one of us essential to the structure. May we stand firm in our resolve to be the best that we can be as representatives of this Good News. Amen.