



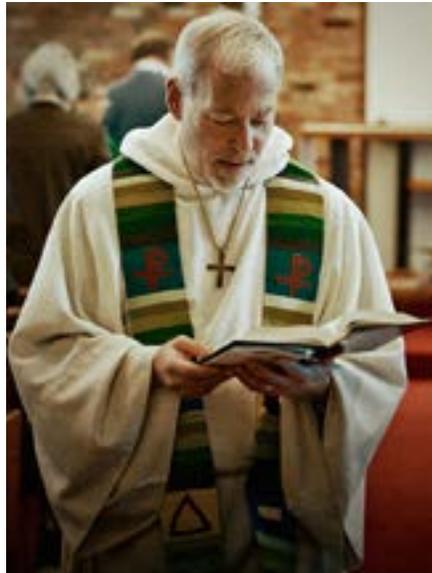
Confronting Tribalism

By the Rev. Mike Wernick
EDWM's Ecumenical and Interfaith Officer

We all need boundaries. We all need limits. Without them there'd be chaos and anarchy. Without them, entropy would get the upper hand, and the edges of both things and ideas would become so blurry, so homogeneous, that (like in one of those science fiction movies) it'd become increasingly difficult to tell "which of these things is not like the other." That's why, in both physical systems and in human relationships, some form of energy must periodically be applied to help them maintain their integrity.

Some boundaries are like one-gallon milk containers. Without them, milk would flood the bottoms of refrigerators. Some boundaries are like people's front doors; you don't cross the threshold without asking permission. And some are more arbitrary, like city, parish, county, state, and national boundaries. Some limits are speed limits – though it seems that few follow them. Some limits are the highest level of decibels allowed in most residential areas, though that might be hard to know on the Fourth of July. And some limits are determined by age, like how old one must be to drive or vote or marry.

Denominations and religions are tribes which have boundaries, like the Twelve Tribes of Israel which were formed about 2,000 years before Jesus was born.



These people would have identified with the idea of gods bound to their own particular cities, and these tribes would have practiced sacrifice to appease their gods and avoid their wrath. But in the seventh century BCE (when Deuteronomy was written), there was a theological insight among the Jewish people—a brilliant flash of light—expressed in the Shema: *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!* They realized that there was only One God over all people and all Creation. One God who united all people. So for about seven hundred years, our theological ancestors were united in the One God; and this is the unity that (Jewish) Jesus and his Abba owned and experienced. And it is this dance of love, this dance of permeable boundaries that the (fully functional) Trinity experiences, without risking entropy

or homogeneity.

In our own functional families, we begin life experiencing that "I and Mother" are One. Infants have no sense of separation from their mother. What's referred to as the *terrible twos* are really the *terrific twos*, because children begin to differentiate. Children begin to experience themselves as separate people. People in relationships which have fluid and permeable and flexible boundaries.

And to the degree that parents are self-differentiated and emotionally healthy themselves, children experience **five freedoms**:

1. The freedom to see and hear what is here and now instead of what should be, or was, or will be.
2. The freedom to feel what they feel instead of what they *ought* to feel.
3. The freedom to speak what they feel and think instead of what others say they "should" feel and think.
4. The freedom to ask for what they want instead of always waiting for permission; and
5. the freedom to take risks on their own behalf instead of just maintaining the *status quo*.

And when parents and their children function this way, they understand that what's normal for them isn't necessarily normative (determinative) for everyone else. When

healthy parents raise healthy children, the children understand that opening Christmas presents on Christmas morning isn't "right" and opening them on Christmas Eve isn't "wrong." When healthy parents raise healthy children, the children understand that being and Episcopalian isn't "right" and being some other denomination isn't "wrong." When healthy parents raise healthy children, the children understand that different pathways to God are: Simply. Different. Pathways. And as fully functional and self-differentiated adults, they find an underlying unity that overcomes all divisions. What matters is whether as adults, they foster the kind of relationship Jesus had with the Father and with the Holy Spirit, and live it out to create Heaven on Earth.

But while there is actually no evidence in creation that God favors uniformity, there are those who take the breadth of God's diversity and use it as something divisive. There are those who hold on to various kinds of ancient tribalisms, and inject them with life and death implications. Many churches are caught up in a kind of denominational tribalism, asserting their own inherent *rightness*, above and beyond all others. Global insistence that we are *right* and others are *wrong* is killing us. And it's my belief that we cannot have bright, shining, glorious Gospel lives without also tending to and healing our society's family of origin issues and our shameful theological agoraphobia.

But there is hope. There is always hope. The Episcopal Church is currently in full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, India, Old Catholic Churches of the Union of

Utrecht, the Philippine Independent Church, the Church of Sweden, and The Moravian Church - Northern and Southern Provinces. Full communion means that each Com-

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munion recognizes the catholicity and independence of the other and maintains its own; each Communion agrees to admit members of the other Communion to participate in the Sacraments; and that Intercommunion does not require from either Communion the acceptance of all doctrinal opinion, sacramental devotion, or liturgical practice characteristic of the other, but implies that each believes the other to hold all the essentials of the Christian faith. And The Episcopal Church is currently in dialogue with three other traditions: the Roman Catholic Church (through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops), the Presbyterian Church USA, and the United Methodist Church.

The Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church have recently presented a proposal for full communion: "A Gift to the World: Co-Laborers for the Healing of Brokenness; The Episcopal Church and The United Methodist Church" which could be passed at the UMC's General Conference (likely in 2020) and at TEC's General Convention (likely in 2021). In the

meantime, there exists a Eucharistic Sharing Agreement which was passed at General Convention in 2006, in which the two traditions recognize each other as members of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church in which the Gospel is rightly preached. The resolution permits common, joint celebration of the Eucharist where it is deemed appropriate for the sharing of worship by congregations of the respective Churches. And while UMC clergy cannot currently serve in an Episcopal Church due to the canonical requirement that clergy be ordained in the historic episcopate in its strictest, linear sense, that requirement would be waived in the case of the UMC, if passed. Though even now, UMC laity may become members of an Episcopal Church (those who have been Confirmed in the UMC would be received in the Episcopal Church).

The (late) Rev. Walter R. Bouman (contributor to the Called to Common Mission Concordat and professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary) said: "The agreement between the Episcopal Church and the ELCA is an essential dimension of the mission of the church because it is a witness that the Triune God is making One, what had previously been divided and at times even alienated." And this Concordat shows how it is possible to maintain denominational integrity while allowing for permeability at the same time. It not only affirms a theological reciprocity between equals, but also establishes the groundwork for reciprocal practice in mission and ministry, since these arise out of that same unity about which Jesus spoke. It may never be that there is 100% agreement on all issues of church polity, theology, real presence, and Christology, but we can choose to not allow

God's diversity to be or become divisive.

I have been blessed to serve the congregations of Ascension Lutheran Church and The Church of the Holy Cross (known together as Two Churches), which recognize the authenticity of each other's teaching and practices. And even as we strive to celebrate those things which make us uniquely Lutheran and uniquely Episcopal, we place our focus on that most

important element which we hold in common—our faith in Christ. While leveraging resources, we come together in unity to live out the call and message of the Gospel in service to our neighbors. And as we continue in this common life, and the covenant which has come out of our relationship, we pray that we may be increasingly guided by God's wisdom, illumined by God's light, protected under God's wing, and receive the courage to make bold decisions.

And that is my prayer for all denominations and all faiths.

The Rev. Mike Wernick
Two Churches, Kentwood, MI
rectorpastor@comcast.net

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