

*Sacred Diversity*  
A Sermon on Proverbs 8:1-8 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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This is what I believe: each person is created by God in the image of God. This is what I see in each of you. God has given you powerful gifts: the ability to remember, the ability to express your ideas, the ability to create something new, and the ability to create relationships of trust with other people. God has given you powerful gifts. God has given each person a unique combination of abilities. God has created the diversity we see in our world, in our nation, in our community, and in our church family. I would go so far as to say this diversity is sacred.

We can tell diversity is sacred because God contains diverse attributes and powers within God's self. This is the point of Trinity Sunday, the day we celebrate today. On Trinity Sunday we recognize that God's presence and activity in our lives is rich and diverse. God is the one who creates us, the one who sustains us, and the one who redeems us. God is the one who forgives us and the one who judges whether we have forgiven others. God is the one who knows us best and the one whose ways and work are beyond our understanding.

We can tell diversity is sacred because Scripture does not merely tolerate diversity. Holy Scripture encourages and embodies the diversity of God's people. Scripture depicts many, diverse manifestations of God's presence.

Our passage from Proverbs 8 is just one of many examples in the Hebrew Scriptures that depict God using feminine pronouns. Proverbs 8 depicts divine activity in ways that are sometimes considered to be feminine. *Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out.* It's not entirely clear whether Wisdom is a manifestation of God's being, or a separate, independent creature. People who spend their lives studying the Bible make good arguments for each position, the same way they argue about the meaning of the first chapter of John: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* Regardless of whether 'Wisdom' or 'the Word' are separate, independent creatures, the central idea remains the same. Scripture contains a wide variety of descriptions of God's activity and presence in the world.

In the Hebrew Scriptures there seems to be a rule that the diverse depictions of God will all get included, even when they don't agree with one another. The different stories about God's activity get layered on top of one another, like a thick pan of lasagna. We see two layers in the two creation stories found in chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Genesis. In the first story, God creates all of the creatures and natural forces, and then creates humankind in God's image. In this story God is appreciative and grateful. Six times God looks at the created world and sees that it is very good. The second creation story is focused on the creation of humankind. God creates Adam and Eve and has conversations with them. In this story God is more of a micromanager. God punishes Adam and Eve for their disobedience and for refusing to take responsibility for their behavior.

The important thing for you and me is that God's activity in our lives is rich and diverse. We imagine God in diverse ways, as female and male, as new and life-changing, as ancient and eternal. We feel God's presence in our lives in diverse ways.

In a similar way there is a growing theme of the diversity of God's people in the books of the Bible. In the book of Genesis, the family of God's people is a tribe, and a small one at first. God's family is clearly growing and diversifying as we move through the books of the Torah, through the Wisdom literature, and through the Prophets. In Isaiah 49 God says to the people, *It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*

Jesus builds on Isaiah's theme of God's salvation being offered to all people. In the New Testament, Jesus actively breaks down the barriers that have separated people based on their poverty or wealth, their work, their gender, and whether they have been infected with leprosy or are suffering from diseases or disabilities. Many people around Jesus kept strict boundaries between themselves and the Samaritans, in a way that reminds us of current attempts to make strict boundaries between American citizens and those living in the United States without formal immigration status. Jesus was constantly breaking down these barriers in ways that upset and offended many members of his community.

We can tell diversity is sacred because Jesus did not merely tolerate diversity. Jesus insisted that women be included in activities that had been reserved for men. In Jesus' time it was traditional for men to not have long conversations with women outside of their families. Jesus had long conversations with women, which often surprised and offended those around him, including his disciples. They responded by saying, "What are you doing, talking with her?!"

In emphasizing the inclusion of women, Jesus was also acting directly against the ideals and norms of the Roman Empire. A few generations before the birth of Jesus, the Roman emperor was struggling to maintain control of his sprawling, unstable empire. According to a new book by historian Augustine Sedgewick, the emperor instituted new ideas of patriarchy as a way of stabilizing and controlling his empire. It was the emperor who insisted that fathers would be the absolute authorities and rulers of their families, in the same way that the emperor would be the absolute authority and ruler of the Roman Empire.

On this Father's Day, let's recall that Jesus' words and actions deliberately broke the rules of the domineering patriarchy of the Roman Empire. The disciples tried to keep the little children and their mothers away from their Lord and master. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me." Jesus told parables of diversity and inclusion, such as the parable of the Wedding Banquet, and the parable of the Good Samaritan. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his disciples that the poor, the hungry, and those who are suffering are not to be excluded or looked down on; they will inherit the Kingdom of heaven.

We can tell diversity is sacred because Jesus insisted on including diverse people in his ministry. But the boundaries that separated people into a rigid caste system were ingrained in the culture of the Ancient Roman empire. The first generations of disciples struggled to create a church that would share the Good News of God's saving love for all people, regardless of their diverse attributes.

St. Paul was the primary individual to interpret Jesus' ideas about diversity and inclusion for the first generations of Christians. Paul gave the first theological explanation for the importance of diversity in his letter to the Corinthians. He wrote, *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them....Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ...If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?* Each of Paul's letters has different themes and each letter or set of letters was written to a different group, or in some cases, different groups of congregations. But the theme of diversity is present in all of his longer letters. God's saving love is intended for all people, regardless of their diverse attributes.

We can tell diversity is sacred because St. Paul repeatedly returns to this theme. In 1 Corinthians Paul excoriates the wealthy members of the congregation because during their celebration of communion they take large quantities of bread and wine over to the side and have a little party, while the poor members of the congregation have nothing. In Galatians Paul writes *In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

We can tell diversity is sacred because we see God working most powerfully in our churches when our congregations are filled with people of diverse backgrounds, of different economic classes, bringing diverse skills, energies, and perspectives to the work of the church.

We can tell diversity is sacred because we see the way it brings strength, resilience, and wisdom to our ministry teams. When St. Paul's Vestry meets each month to guide the work of the church we make better decisions when we have women and men, people with lots of experience and people with new ideas, and people of different backgrounds working together. It works the same way with all of our ministry teams. It works the same way in the places where you work. It works the same way in our families.

We can tell diversity is sacred because in our diversity we find the abundance of God's gifts. In our diversity we find trust and connection. In our diversity we find strength and resilience. In our diversity we find laughter and joy. In our diversity we come together and work together as members of the body of Christ.