

Many Rooms
John 14:1-9a
May 22, 2011
Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

We each have a heritage we bring with us to worship. Some of us grew up in a church much like this one, but many came from another denomination, a church in another country, or from no church background at all. This is the nature of the post-modern society: we are very diverse!

Today we will highlight some of St. John's cultural diversity.

I wonder who can read the characters on the front of your bulletin? In Japanese, reading down, the writing says the beginning of the Serenity Prayer: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

The attention of the world went to Japan, when on March 11 a great earthquake and tsunami hit the northeastern coast of that country. The news today continues to tell about the disaster at the Fukushima Power Plant, which is now a global problem. Because in our congregation we have Japanese people, Takiko Gould and Kokiko Hayden, we have a personal connection to the tragedy unfolding in Japan. The needs of the people left homeless and injured by destroyed buildings and contaminated by radioactive material become our prayer concerns. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." Takiko was born into a Christian family. But less than 1/2 of one percent of the people of Japan are Christian. Catholic missionaries went to Japan in the 1500s and Protestant missionaries in the 1800s.

The standard American Christian belief in churches in the 19th and 20th centuries was to go out and convert "the heathen." The missionary movement taught the Christian faith around the world, but it also taught a Euro-centric mentality.

The scripture we read today was often the basis of the missionary movement: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). The idea was to save the world by teaching non-believers about Jesus.

Another person in our congregation, Kim Tay, is Chinese from Singapore. (She is ending her term as an English teacher in Petaluma this week and preparing to leave for Singapore next week.) She told me how she worshiped in a Christian cell group in Singapore, when she lived there, much like our spirituality-groups. She described the intimate sharing to be like the sharing of brothers and sisters in the family; the family is very close in Chinese culture. She knew ethnic Chinese missionaries who went from Singapore to China to teach people under Communism about Christ. Some of us read about Chinese Christians in our Lenten study book by Philip Yancey this past spring, how Christians are meeting in secret, hungry for the hope of the gospel. In this setting, it appears that missionaries are bringing a welcome message to oppressed people. The missionaries are invited by the people,

though not by the Communist government. Many Christian leaders have been put under house arrest. There may be about 54 million Christians in China today, many of whom meet in house churches. This is an example of missionary work that is changing Chinese society.

The Philippine Islands are 93 % Christian. Ferdinand Magellan brought Christianity to the Philippines in 1591. About 10% of the population is Protestant, the rest Catholic. We have many Filipino United Methodists in our Conference, and a number in our congregation. Filipino people have scattered all around the world to find jobs and to build their lives, in a Filipino Diaspora. Where they land, they look for community in the church. Today the Biteng family will sing for us a song in their language, Tagalog.

Our cultural heritage is so much of who we are. Immigrants coming to America look for a way to keep their culture alive. The church is one way to do that.

Provided there is room for diverse cultural expression in the church.

For African American people, the church has always been a unifying force and a place of community. Both the Exodus story and the gospel message of freedom have brought hope to oppressed people, and so many of the spirituals sing about this freedom and hope. Marie Fox has offered to tell a little about the importance of the black church in her experience.

Susan Timko has a background in the Russian Orthodox Church. She celebrates Orthodox Christmas and Easter and loves the ritual of her church. She would like to share the importance of icons in the Orthodox Church and sing a song of the Easter season.

Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms." Today's church must have *many rooms* for many cultures and many traditions. We are not a monolithic culture—we are a *multi-cultural* society, and we must be a *multi-cultural* church.

Most people today have not been raised in one church. Most people sample different religious traditions. I met a Buddhist-Methodist in seminary. She was studying to become an interfaith chaplain. I know a woman who grew up Catholic who is now a United Church of Christ pastor. I can't tell you how many people I have met or heard about who say they are spiritual, but not religious.

There is a hunger for *community*—which the church offers. There is a hunger for *intimacy*—which the church offers. And there is a hunger for *belonging*—which the church offers. We come from very diverse backgrounds, but in the church we find common

ground. The ground is our belief in one God who created us all and loves us deeply. We come to know this God in Jesus, a human being who died and became the risen Christ in the minds of the Easter people and down through the ages. We are Christians who gather every Sunday to celebrate a mini-resurrection.

Marcus Borg writes extensively about the difference between the man, Jesus of Nazareth, who was an historical figure, and the post-resurrection Christ, who is not an historical figure, but a product of people's faith in love and hope. When we say in John's Gospel, "I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," we are talking about faith—that we believe that Christ will always be a way to understand God. For God is so hard to understand. We need symbols and stories and creeds and hymns to feel the presence of God. And so Jesus says, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." It's not a literal sentence. It's a poetic statement of the greatness of the risen Christ.

And when we come to worship this risen Christ, there is no right way to pray, no right language to speak, and no right kind of music to perform. "My Father's house has many rooms," enough rooms that no one will be troubled, that all will be welcome. Many rooms for many traditions! May it be so for us here at St. John's.