

Sunday (June 28th)

Community of Healing + Hope for the Future

Community of Healing Questions for Discussion:

1. Dr. Cleveland shares her vision of the church: “I see the church as a healing community for people who have been beat down by society, but often we are the opposite of that. We contribute to the beating down.”

How can the church become this kind of “healing community”?

How has the church contributed to harm rather than healing?

How can we better affirm the image of God in people who come to church?

How can we support others for who they are and not who we think they are or should be?

2. Dr. Cleveland says that often the invitation is to come onto “white dominant spaces” so that others can be treated as “equal.” “I think that can actually be damaging. It is really getting to know people’s stories and it is asking, ‘What do you need? How do you need your voice amplified. What kind of space do you need? Who is the image of God in you’?”

How can predominantly white churches start to ask some of these questions?

3. Dr. Cleveland refers to the Black liberation theologian James Cone saying, “Blackness is the image of God in Black people.” Cleveland adds that in order to honor this image of God, one has “to know something about Black people.”

How can those who are not Black better understand this image of God in Black people?

4. Dr. Cleveland talks about the racism she experienced not as being explicit but implicit, i.e. not caring about her own history.

How might it be important to understand the history of those who are different than ourselves?

How might this contribute to our own self-understanding?

5. Cleveland says, “The idea that we are post-racial is a lie.” She adds that “there has been push for people to create a post-racial church.” There have been other attempts to create an atmosphere where we can deny racial problems, but this does not address a systemic issue. She then refers to the theologian, J. Camera Carter, who says, “We don’t need a post-racial church. We need a post-white church.”

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What might be the difference between having a person of color on staff at a church and addressing the problem of racism?

What does it mean to have a post-white church?

What might this kind of church look like?

Why might this be difficult for some people to hear?

6. Cleveland observes, "The dominant story, the dominant theological perspectives, the dominant voices, the dominant culture, in terms of just music...has always been white." While, others who are not white have been relegated to the side.

How can churches do a better job at giving space to those who are not part of the dominant narrative?

What might be the value of listening to voices that are not part of the dominant culture?

7. Cleveland relates this to the image of the body of Christ: "We don't need anymore on that perspective, for now...I keep on returning to the metaphor of the body of Christ. I think Paul was just brilliant in bringing up that metaphor...I feel like we have a body with thirty-seven elbows because the same part of the body is taking over the body. We can't walk. We can't breathe. We can't dance."

How is it that one part of the "body" has gained dominance over the other parts of the body?

How is this detrimental to the entire "body"?

What does this say about how the church should look like for your community?

8. Dr. Cleveland says she understands "why a hand would have the audacity to say 'Well, I see the world from my perspective. I know why I am useful. I don't live the life of a heel...I don't have any first hand evidence of how useful the heel is.'"

What might be the cause of our limited perspective in the church?

How might we see the world through the eyes of the other "parts of the body"?

Reflection

For many, the church is a source of both hurt and healing. The redeemed people, the people in whom Paul calls "saints," the "people of God," are people who could both do the most damage and provide the most healing. It is a source of hurt, not only because the people in the church are only people, but also because the people in the church are expected to be better people. Whether or not this expectation is realistic is not the point. To be a church is to have the responsibility of rightly representing Christ in the world. To disregard this responsibility is like a parent saying, "You should not expect me to be a good parent. I'm only human."

Much of the damage that the church does is to itself. Paul's image of the "body" is culturally important. In certain branches of Greek philosophy, there was the disregard of the body; the

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soul was the more important part of the person. Also, the body operates as a cohesive whole. No part operates for the sake of itself. The heart operates to pump blood for the other organs. The lungs operate to supply oxygen to the blood. The limbs operate to do the task for the body and the mind. All organs work together towards a goal of wholeness and happiness. But in the church, many people act as though they operate for the sake of themselves. They function not as a “member” of a body, but more of a parasite.

To be an “embodied” congregation is to exist with the awareness that all parts matter to each individual part. But many churches would rather cut off limbs to preserve parts deemed more important. At one congregation where I was an assistant pastor, the “main” congregation, predominantly white, always saw their Hispanic “mission” as a separate entity. There was much hostility and anger when the mission did not help to grow the main population, even though the sponsoring church was in an urban neighborhood that no longer looked like them. Soon this Hispanic mission was not permitted to congregate at that church building.

Several years later, I was asked to preach at a church that had the same problems of changing demographics, but instead the few elderly people still remaining decided to give their main building to a Hispanic congregation. The “white” congregation decided to worship in the chapel and gave the sanctuary to a thriving group of worshipers who represented the neighborhood. However, the times I was invited to preach, they seemed to be happy, full of energy, and loving. They were excited to hear a Vietnamese voice preach to their white ears.

The difference between the two congregations was that one understood what church was about, and one only sought to sustain themselves. Denying ourselves goes against our better intuitions, but our bodily organs do not think twice about it. The heart knows that if it works for the sake of the other organs then it will work for the sake of itself. Not that it works to get any benefit from its work, but somehow nature has programmed our survival to include other directed actions. What is good for the whole is also good for the parts.

Hope for the Future Questions for Discussion:

1. Dr. Cleveland says, “Young people who are basically fed up...one of the things I really love about millennials is that we grew up step in division.” Divorce, war, and a distrust for the political system plague this generation. For Cleveland, because of growing up in this division, young people understand their need for wholeness. Many young people resent not being introduced to more diversity, one of her students even saying, “I feel like I’ve been lied to my whole life.”

What issues do young people face that make them aware of the pervasive disunity in our culture?

Why are so many young people disgruntled with having to participate in the dominant culture?

2. Dr. Cleveland observes, “As soon as you give [young people] the theology to help explain why they’ve been disgruntled even though they did not know they were disgruntled, it breaks it open for them. Reconciliation is salvation.”

How is reconciliation and salvation the same?

How can we help young people understand that “reconciliation is salvation”?

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How might this help with their feelings of resentment?

3. Dr. Cleveland adds, "You can't really separate reconciliation from salvation." Cleveland refers to Miroslav Volf and other's conception of Trinitarian theology where the relationships between the persons of the Trinity have a "mutual interiority." The image is often called perichoresis meaning, literally, "rotation," or more figuratively, a "dance." Cleveland then relates this image to the "mutual interiority" of the body of Christ.

How are the persons of the Trinity related together in mutuality?

How is this a helpful image in describing how relationships in the church are supposed to work?

4. *How does the cross help us see our dependence on each other and our need to invite "the other into ourselves"?*
5. *How is the cross "a critique of power?"*

Reflection

The Trinity is a picture of the relationship between the persons of God that we traditionally call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is dance of the three in a circle of one. William Paul Young depicts the Trinity in his novel, *The Shack* as a Black Mother, Jewish Son, and Asian Spirit. Many might find these images offensive, but like all models of the Trinity it is a way to describe God. The word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible or New Testament. It comes from a Latin word *trinitas* meaning "three" and is used to describe the inner relationship of God.

We only know of this relationship as described by Jesus in the Gospels and by Paul. Perhaps the earliest Christian letter in the New Testament, 1 Thessalonians, Paul describes God using the terms, "Father," "the Lord Jesus Christ," and "Holy Spirit" (1:1-6), but Paul does not tell the reader anything explicit about their relationship. It was given to the early church to work out this theology of the Trinity. So all this is to say that the Trinity is a model, a good model, but still a model of how God relates together. It seeks to work out concretely a deep mystery that is perhaps as complex as anything else in Christian theology. Yet, to understand something about God is to understand something about ourselves, since Genesis depicts our creation as being made in "the image" and "likeness" of God.

If one way to speak about the Trinity is about the inter-relatedness of persons, then the Trinity helps us to speak about our human relationships. Just as each person of God is shown as mutually embracing, supporting, loving, and pointing toward each other, we are to see this as a model of how we are to relate. It is a model that shows a deep dependence on each other. If this is how we are created as humans, then our relationships must involve this type of dependence and mutuality. The more we move away from these kinds of relationships the more we reject the image of God that is in us.

Our identities and how we relate to each other are tightly woven into this model of the Trinity. It is a model that speaks of a living and dynamic God, not a static and immutable deity. However, some Christians might prefer the image of God who is removed from this world, who stands back and watches the creation. This uninvolved god is not the picture of the YHWH God in the Bible, but the god of nationalism. It is the god of "In God we trust" on the U.S. currency. It is

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also the god of “Gott Mit Uns” (God is with us), worn on the belt buckles of the unified Germany armies during the Second World War.

The Christian image of God cannot be an ideology, only an idea, but is a reality of relatedness. It forces us to enter into relationships that are vital to who we are as persons, so that we can come to know the true God, and not some other likeness. Even God, who is self contained within God’s own community, welcomes us, includes us into God’s self. This is what the incarnation was about. God became human so we might know God more fully and come to join God in community.