

## "No Hope in Division"

Once, when I was in second grade, I got in trouble. I remember it quite clearly because it was rare. It's not that I was perfect, but I was an especially anxious rule-follower.

We were in music class, where Mr. Anson was teaching us "Down By the Bay"—one of those songs you're really better off not learning. I've always had a sticky brain for songs and a hard time stopping once I've started singing. Just when Mr. Anson had quieted us to begin teaching the second verse, I belted out "Down by the baaaaay!" He was not pleased, and I was asked to take a break until I could control myself.

When we returned to our classroom, we gathered on the story-time rug, and Mrs. Peters asked us how music class had gone. A few of my classmates were so excited to tell her that *Michael* had gotten in trouble, that they shouted over each other and Mrs. Peters couldn't understand them at first. I felt sick—that sour stone in the pit of my stomach feeling. It was bad enough getting in trouble with Mr. Anson, but I adored Mrs. Peters.

My classmates were doing what we humans love to do, trying to elevate their standing with Mrs. Peters by diminishing mine. We behave like this before all manner of authorities: teachers, parents, bosses, God. Some part of us—what St. Paul calls "the flesh"—believes that turning against each other is in our best interest. I have a brother so I am well-acquainted with this part of myself. As a child, I was forever shouting, "Mom, Jamie hit me!" or "Mom, Jamie's getting a cookie!"

I don't do that much anymore. Because I'm an adult now, and I try to avoid acting like a child. But being shrewd, being a human adult, does not make me an adult in Christ. Learning how to better disguise my jealousy, quarreling, and self-righteousness is not spiritual maturity. That's human maturity.

Christ's reinterpretation of the law seems harsh. Anger is murder. Lust is adultery. Divorce is adultery. But Christ is pointing us beyond human maturity, to consider well our inner, spiritual maturity. Seen from this perspective, his words lay the foundation for deep compassion. For a law which no person can keep permits no finger wagging, no delight in a neighbor's shortcoming, no division of the righteous from the unrighteous. Jesus's teaching on the law makes it clear: we cannot draw closer to God by competition or comparison.

Jesus said it best himself: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

There is no path to God that separates or divides us from each other. The path is recognizing that there is no each other. We are all branches of the one true vine.

This is more than a spiritual metaphor. It is the nature of reality. Over the last century, scientists have begun to sound like mystics as they observe and describe this. Erwin Schrodinger, one of the fathers of quantum theory, says, "In truth there is only one mind." Theoretical physicist David Bohm puts it this way: "Deep down the consciousness of mankind is one." Albert Einstein, agreeing with them, adds, "Our task must be to... widen our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

And recent research conducted by Drs. James Fowler and Nicholas Christakis, authors of the book *Connected*, produced these incredible results: "If your friend's friend's friend becomes happy—someone you've never met or heard of—that has a greater effect on your happiness than if someone put \$5,000 in your pocket." ([huffpost.com](http://huffpost.com) | "7 Billion Minds, or One?" | Dec. 24, 2013)

If anybody else is thinking "put \$5,000 in my pocket and I'll be the judge of that..." there's more proof that our minds are connected.

It's hard to believe that someone I've never met could affect my emotional well-being so powerfully, but think about germs. Two hundred years ago we didn't understand our shared physical health. Now hand-washing and coughing into your elbow are common sense, things you learn in pre-school.

Nowadays, the importance of hand washing is so obvious that it surprised me to learn that it was discovered scientifically, by trial and error. Ignaz Semmelweis was a doctor in Vienna in the 1840s. In his hospital there were two maternity wards, and he noticed that the mortality rate among mothers was five times greater in one ward than it was in the other. This seemed odd to him so he began to identify differences between the two wards and to test them as possible causes of the discrepancy in mortality rates.

His initial theories are almost laughable in retrospect. For example, outside one of the wards, priests would walk past with ringing bells. Semmelweis hypothesized that the sound of the bells may have scared the women to death.

It took a few guesses like this for him to land on the real culprit: autopsies. In the ward with the higher mortality rate, autopsies and child birth were occurring in the same room, sometimes using the same instruments. He suggested that doctors wash their hands and instruments with a chlorine solution and voila: mothers lived.

It seems almost unbelievable: childbirth and autopsies in the same ward, sharing instruments. Germs, though still invisible, are common sense now. We know our physical health is interconnected. Two hundred years from now, will the interconnectedness of our spirit be common sense? And, if so, what will our descendants look back on in disbelief?

Our divided neighborhoods? The assumption that we could imprison millions of bodies with no damage to the hearts and minds of those who were free? How will our great grandchildren make sense of a people who added and removed waste from their homes in equal measure—flushing away physical waste to keep us healthy, while streaming in the voices of anger, lust, and fear that made us heartsick?

We are living in that childbirth ward. Even with death all around us, new life is constantly arriving. Christ is being born in all of us, all the time—begging us to recognize our connectedness, to see Christ in one another. To see that we are one.

We gather here each week in celebration of Holy Communion that our eyes might be opened again to the truth: though we are many, we all share one bread, one cup.

It's the truth Christ speaks in his sermon on the mount, that if the law sets us against our neighbor it brings us no closer to God.

It's the truth Paul writes to the people of Corinth: "when one says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not merely human?"

It's the truth Mrs. Peters showed me in second grade.

When I got in trouble in music class, and some of my classmates were beside themselves with excitement, Mrs. Peters response to them surprised me. I expected her to be disappointed with me, perhaps even to punish me in some way. Instead, she grew quiet. And this was her response: "your classmate had a hard time in music today; that's not something to celebrate."

Mrs. Peters reminded us of our connectedness, our relatedness. "Your classmate," she said. It was the Gospel, hiding in plain sight in my public school. I think back on her

response and am reminded of the parable of the prodigal son—how the younger brother complains to his father, saying, “this son of yours, who has devoured your property with prostitutes,” and the father rebukes him, saying, “this brother of yours was lost and has been found.”

There is no hope that divides us from each other. Our hope is in Christ, in whom we are all one. Leave your offering, Jesus says, and go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift.