

God Delights in Diversity - Not Called to Compromise but Dialogue

Address: Verdun Uniting Church, September 3, 2006

When Graham and I agreed on this title, we both assumed I would be talking about interfaith relations.

There is so much that could be said about this topic! But I come not to present an academic paper, but rather some sketches - like a portrait painter at a first sitting – hopefully providing some thoughts that may be helpful as we leave this place to go about our everyday life.

Let me begin with, what is for me, are some recent discoveries.

First, about *Diversity*:

God Delights in Diversity – yes we see it in creation - the birds, the trees, the fish, the clouds.
But God also delights in *pluralism*!

What's the difference?

Diversity is a word that implies that there are different entities. To recognize diversity is to recognize difference. But it says nothing about relationships between the different entities.

Pluralism, on the other hand, implies interaction between the different entities.

Diana Eck of Harvard's Pluralism Project puts it this way as she addressed an interfaith gathering at Wellesley College in the USA:

"Pluralism is an **encounter** of all of our differences. It is a **reconstruction** and **renegotiation** of our common life in light of that encounter. Pluralism **requires something of us**; it is not a given; it is an achievement. What is required is the kind of six years of work that the Multi-faith Council here at Wellesley has put into it. This is one of the stories of the movement **from diversity to pluralism** that is still being written."

That is the movement that has been happening in Multifaith Chaplaincy at Flinders University.

Some Australian Universities now boast multifaith chaplaincy. But what they usually mean is that they recognize religious *diversity*. Each chaplain primarily does their own thing with their own people.

But Flinders Multifaith Chaplaincy is *pluralist* in that we see ourselves not just as individuals with our own differences, but as a community of colleagues, a team. That does not deny our differences and that we still find ourselves ministering to our own, but that we recognize our common ministry to all. This means that I minister to anyone, whether they be, as St Paul might say, "Jew or Gentile, slaves or free, male or female, Gay or Straight, rich or poor, student or professor..." - and as appropriate, I refer them to others as appropriate.

It also means that we engage in all kinds of projects together for the benefit of the university as a whole. As Eck says, this kind of chaplaincy demands something of us, "a renegotiation of our common life in light of our encounter."

It's in that "renegotiation" that "**dialogue**" comes in. It's the wonderful discovery of each other, for me so similar to the way young love happens – the curiosity, the sharing of one's life stories, the joy of discovering yourself in the other; what I thought was "just me" is also you – and yet not you!

God delights in diversity. Yes, diversity is a reality of God's creation. But God delights in **pluralism** – diversity interacting together in harmony. “Dialogue” is the communication within pluralism.

Second: *Not Called to Compromise...*

As I viewed the overall topic, the word “compromise” came to the fore, seeming to have most need to be drawn out at this time.

Perhaps I am influenced by the knowledge, this week, that the Reforming Alliance has taken legal advice claiming that the decisions of the 10th Assembly in relation to sexuality and leadership are invalid or irregular.

These are the kinds of scenarios that are played out when “compromise” is at issue.

I was at a funeral on Friday morning.

It was the funeral of the mother of my Buddhist colleague.

He spoke warmly of his mother who had died. He did not hide the fact that there had been a divorce in the family when he was young. But he said he had come to see later that, in a way, it was inevitable. He blamed neither his mother nor his father. “It has been said that she was a person who knew everything and he was always right!” he said good humouredly. “They were just not able to compromise.”

“Politics’, they say, “is the art of compromise”.

I suppose by this we mean that two parties, who have different views that need to be resolved to get something done, each need to *give* a little, move toward common ground, to finally come to agreement. From the perspective of each party, it's a lose-lose situation.

Each must give a little.

Each must lose a little.

Each accepts something less because what each wanted is unattainable. Having compromised at least *something* is agreed!

On the other hand, if there is no compromise, there is an **impasse**; there can be no forward movement together. Inevitably such impasses lead to the parties hardening their positions, justifying their positions to themselves over and against the other. Both parties move further apart, communication ceases or becomes bitter. The only agreement seems to be to go separate ways - a separation, a divorce.

At the international level we see the dynamics of impasse being played out daily, Israel's wall being a contemporary tragic symbol. Many of us can remember the “Iron Curtain” that separated the Communist East from the West in Europe, and the infamous Berlin Wall.

When agreement can't or won't be reached, the solution is *the wall*. Division!

Family separation or extreme nationalism, the breakdown in communication plays itself out in stereotyping, name-calling and intensifying hostility.

I call this mindset, this set of transactions, having its own inner logic, “the compromise game”. It is a game about power.

There were those in my fathers’ generation who could not countenance conversation with the Japanese. There was a story on TV of an old Australian soldier who could never forgive atrocities by the Japanese in the Second World War. Somehow he was at last convinced to go to Japan, but still he steeled himself against any return of hospitality by his Japanese hosts. And then, so the story goes, as he was sitting in a Japanese garden, watching swans, the beauty of the scene and the grace of the swans broke through his hardened heart. In that moment of sublime beauty, the grace of it crept through his defences; the beauty got to him and from that moment he began to see things differently.

This new perspective did not deny his outrage of the atrocities. But now they were placed in a different perspective. He was liberated from the power of the past over him.

This wasn’t compromise, it was **transformation**. Transformation took him to a completely different level.

Compromise is more rational, more legal, more mathematical, if you like. I’ll give you this if you give me that.

But transformation is all grace; something takes you to a different level, making what you thought important at the time, seem secondary, because there is a bigger picture, and what you were hanging on to is seen for what it is in a bigger context. And so this ‘something’ ceases to have the power it once had. It takes its proper place. There is perspective. There is no need to have to defend it as if it were all that mattered!

In the Gospels, the Scribes and Pharisees seem to have been given the role by the writers as those who play the “no compromise” game. The “no compromise” game demanded one had to fulfil the letter of the law.

But allow me a footnote. By making this statement, I am not trying to belittle or vilify the Scribes and Pharisees. They were devout, God-fearing men who were defending the faith at a time of Roman occupation and foreign influence. And notice that I say that the Gospel writers have *cast* them in this role. Why? Because they provide the foil to tell the story of the Jew who challenged the “no compromise” game.

The Gospels describe Jesus as one who wouldn’t play the “no-compromise game”.

1. They invite him in to it.

Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.

2. They tell him off for not playing the game.

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Note that Jesus does not reject the Law as such, but points to a larger reality that provides a context for appreciating the Law.

3. They try “put downs” to get a reaction:

“It is the chief of the demons who gives him the power to drive out demons”.

4. They try to conform Jesus to their game:

Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Western logic would assume that if Jesus is not playing the “no compromise” game, he must be playing the “compromise” game.

But Jesus is not doing the *opposite* of the “no compromise” game. He is not a compromiser. He is playing a different game altogether! The game of transformation.

This game is bigger than any compromise game. Rules about what you can eat or drink, or when you can or can’t work are put into a bigger perspective. We are not to be tied down to these rules even though they were originally given for our benefit; because we are engaged in a bigger enterprise – the enterprise of loving unconditionally, even loving our enemy!

As Jesus went about his life he made friends with all kinds of people, and he became known as the one who was friends with those who had no friends, those who were looked down on, those who didn’t fit in, those who had been thrown out.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Did you see that program on SBS this week about the ex-cop who goes looking for a Thai girl back in Thailand ten years after he had picked her up for prostitution in Sydney. He realised at the time that our Government treated her as a criminal, when in fact she was a victim.

“No compromise” treats asylum seekers as illegal immigrants, law breakers. They are! But Jesus sees them as victims who need befriending, lifting up and restoring to the fullness of human life.

That SBS story was a Jesus story. That ex-cop went out of his way, paid all the expenses, to find that girl, to expose the corruption, the lies, the evil, and to extend to her his friendship. In doing so, he reconciled her to her family. His actions restored relationships. His actions lifted people’s self-respect and dignity.

Why are so many Christians scared of “compromise”?

I suspect it may be because they are locked into the “compromise game” mindset; that faithfulness means some kind of religious purity.

Ironically, Jesus never plays that game.

He becomes ritually impure by touching a leper.

I suggest he doesn't touch the leper merely to prove that he won't play the “no compromise” purity game. He touches him because the leper has not known human touch since his leprosy. He touches him because that's how love is shown. He touches him because he sees him not as a leper but as a fellow human person. And in that touch, there is healing. In that touch, which places laws of purity back where they belong, Jesus restores him to human wholeness.

In the time between agreeing on the title for my address and giving it today, the title has radically changed:

from *God Delights in Diversity* to *God Delights in Pluralism*

from *Not Called to Compromise* to *Not Playing the “No-Compromise Game”*

from *Dialogue* to *Transformation*

God Delights in Pluralism - Not Playing the “No-Compromise Game” but Transformation.