“A Color Chart”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“One in the Spirit, one in the Lord . . .” We know the lyric from a song many of us probably can sing from memory. I wonder how many of us spend very much time thinking about how alike we are to every other human being on Earth. Perhaps some of you read the article highlighted in the NY Times yesterday about the various places of origin of the human species. We turn to the study of genetics for a lot of reasons, with great excitement around ways in which our physical health can be aided and even extended because of what we learn at the genetic level. I was struck yesterday by a simple truth regarding scientific facts of our human origin. We all come from the same place; well, we now know that that same place is not just *one* area on the African continent, but from various areas. I am very far from a scientist, not even leaning toward the scientific. I know that some of you are, however. Something strikes me about our human origin stories from science and from the vast stories from around the world that indicate our beginning from the earth itself. What strikes me is more about the facts we choose to believe and the facts we choose to highlight regarding humanity. The two readings this morning reveal something of our disunity and about our unity, with Jesus’ prayer that we may all be one as he, with God, is one.

We are one in the Spirit; we are one in the Lord, but sometimes we don’t feel like it, do we? I know that too often we see our differences more than our similarities and are put off by those things that belong only to this world, and not to God’s Kingdom. I know that I can sometimes judge when I ought to pray, and particularly when I am frustrated by division. What might a God’s eye view of all of creation look like, do you suppose? I do wonder what God sees in looking down at all of humanity, and I do wonder how God feels about our divisions. In loving God, and in wanting to *glorify God*, what might our actions be? Having accepted the word of God we have learned through his son, Jesus Christ, do we know God well? How might we continue the work we have learned to do in a way that glorifies God, and that responds to Jesus’ prayer that we might all be one? Perhaps the oneness that God seeks and sometimes sees isn’t homogeneity as we sometimes think. We have but one Christ, in Jesus. We know God through Jesus and through the word in the Bible. What does God see, though, in looking at the entirety of the world? Can we know? What we know with certainty, from scripture, is that we are not to judge. Several times this week, I have had glimpses of what I hope will be a helpful image for you, as it has been for me. This world of ours is an interesting palette of color, whose brilliance may well glorify God if we can see it with a God’s-eye view instead of our individual, differentiating, sometimes judgmental viewing point. We have our origin with God and are born of love. I imagine the disciples’ wonder and amazement at Jesus’ ascension, and I invite you to muse with me about the sense of returning to oneness this may recall.

The article in the Times bears reading if you have access, or perhaps we might share it together in a Word format. While I don’t pretend to have the background to understand all the science involved, some elements are fascinating, and we might say familiar. I would like to quote a couple of passages and ask that you imagine peoples around the world as we know it now, instead of the precursor species to humans back then: “It’s possible that climate upheavals forced Stem1 and Stem2 people into the same regions, leading them to merge into single groups. Some bands of hunter-gatherers may have had to retreat from the coast as sea levels rose, for example. Some regions of Africa became arid, potentially sending people in search of new homes. . . . Dr. Scerri speculated that living in a network of mingling populations across Africa might have allowed modern humans to survive while Neanderthals became extinct. In that arrangement, our ancestors could hold onto more genetic diversity, which in turn might have helped them endure shifts in the climate, or even evolve new adaptations.

‘This diversity at the root of our species may have been ultimately the key to our success,’ Dr. Scerri said” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/17/science/human-origins-africa.html?te=1&nl=from-the-times&emc=edit_ufn_20230520>).

In my own funk, or befuddlement this week, I decided early on that I had no certain conclusions to draw for us, apart from God’s desire that we all be one. So, let’s consider together another way that we may think of nature’s leaning on variety as it moves toward unity. I have been delighted by the paint job in my new home, even while I know that I aim for a different scheme for myself. Bonnie Preston’s clear delight in color is manifest in the array of color already in her gardens—and also on her walls. Some rooms have four different colors of varying pastels, while others have *only* two or three. My own comfortable palette includes warmer tones and some greater uniformity room to room, though appreciating the variety she embraced, I am choosing to include more color than I usually do overall. Some rooms will have an accent wall or two of color with one unifying cream to brighten each room. Color me traditional in choosing “antique white.” Having held up dozens of color swatches against the trim and the walls, doing so in every kind of lighting I could approach, I decided on fairly neutral creamy walls. When the man at Hammond Lumber in Ellsworth held up the paint after entering in the coded colors that would blend to make that creamy beige, he said, “I think I better wait to see if this comes out right before I mix another. That pink and purple don’t look like they will blend in right.” Sure enough, though, when it was shaken by the machine, the end result was just the right beige to contrast with the white I imagine someday painting the wood trim in some of the rooms. We were both astounded by the variety of colors in the paint mixture—he, so much so that he called over one of the other paint guys. Somehow, there is a way in which even seemingly incompatible colors blend together beautifully. I wonder if that might be what God sees.

It is not all a creamy white world, though, and homogeneity is *not* what God has created or desires for us. So, while we may blend together in unity from time to time, our differences are truly necessary for the variety of beauty that God must see in us. This idea, too, came clear to me this week as I pondered the Gospel message . . . and did a jigsaw puzzle on my computer ata the end of a long day. I hope many of you are familiar with the French Impressionist painter, Renoir. In lovely scenes of riverbank picnics and sun-drenched beaches, families bask in colorful comfort. Although I have been fortunate to gaze at these paintings, both in person and in countless prints and books, even having wondered at how he can use little brush strokes to create such vast images, I have not had the A Ha that I had this week. Seeing the image broken into jigsaw puzzle pieces, I was more keenly aware of the sections of paint. The daubs of independent color were more pronounced, and the texture of the varying depths of paint far more apparent in the HD of my little Ipad screen. How in the world did Auguste Renoir have the vision to see how those little smears of color combine for such a tableau of beauty? Well, it was not by blending them all together in a uniform wall of color—not cream, not blue, pink, purple, brown, yellow or gold. The beauty of a painting and the beauty of life consists in unity, yes, but not in homogeneity. In a song I remembered and have brought from my mom’s expansive library of music, we can celebrate too at some point: “Different is beautiful; God bless variety.”

Too often, though, that is not what we lift up when we identify ourselves as Christian, and seek to glorify God in song and prayer. When we imagine Christian community, I am afraid we too often hope that we might all look alike and think alike. Jesus’ own example of calling disciples reveals a different hope for what God’s kingdom looks like, doesn’t it? Do you remember the wedding banquet when those who were initially invited didn’t respond, and the banquet was filled with those whom society deemed unacceptable? The self-righteous who are certain that they have the key to heaven may well be surprised, and the eternal party may be attended by persons we don’t expect, but who are beautiful in God’s sight.

No, this is not all that this passage from John has to reveal to us. There is much to be said about glory, about heaven, about who might be “the elect.” On this Sunday on which we mark the ascension of Jesus to Heaven and wonder along with his disciples how and when Jesus might return, we can be sure of one thing. God loves us and wants us to love each other. This is at the core of this last discourse of Jesus Christ, and it is at the core of our worshipful response to God.

Let us pray: Loving and generous God, we give you thanks for the gift of your Son. Jesus has taught us to pray by his example, and we earnestly pray with him this morning that we may all be one, Lord. Teach us to love more easily than we judge so that we may glorify you through our words and our deeds. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.