

## Differences

Father, you do not create us to live alone and you have not made us all alike. We thank you for the various societies into which we come, by which we are brought up, and through which we discover your purpose for our lives. Amen.

[*The Wideness of God's Mercy* Jeffery W. Rowthorn]

I was lucky enough to learn how to sail in the little town of Mattapoissett on Buzzard's Bay. Small boat racing, mostly Beetle Cats and Herreshoff 12's, was a big thing in the nineteen forties and early fifties. There was a race for every occasion: Family races, men's races, ladies' races, youth races, children's apprentice races, fourth of July and Labor day regattas, not to mention all the handicap races for bigger boats.

All that racing meant there were lots of chances for us kids to serve as crew, or at least as moveable ballast, and one of the first lessons I learned was that my mother, father, and aunt had very different approaches to the sport.

My Mother was a quiet, reserved person with the impeccable manners of a proper Bostonian. Until the starting gun went off, at which point her hidden aggressiveness would take over. Wherever three or more boats were gathered together, she'd be in the middle of them, often yelling, "Starboard tack! Right of way! Buoy room!" I'd want to crawl under the foredeck. When she won a race it was usually because she had burst through the pack at the finish line. When she lost, it was often because she'd been disqualified for bumping a boat at the windward mark.

My father was just the opposite. When he got into a boat, his main goal was to enjoy the sun, the wind, and the water. If there was a crowd at one end of the starting line, he was perfectly happy to cross at the other end. I remember one day, about half way through a race, when the wind was very light, my father spotted a duck paddling along a few hundred feet away. As it happened, my father was fascinated by ducks, so naturally, we had to go and see if there were any baby ducklings around. It didn't matter that the rest of the boats were headed in another direction, we were going to check out that duck. When my father won a race, which happened more often than you might think, it was usually by five minutes. When he lost, it was often by twenty minutes. Either way, made no difference to him.

My Aunt Polly was a teacher, and she believed in the scientific approach to racing. She knew exactly how the current eddied around Mattapoissett Neck at half tide, and how a southeast wind swept through Molly's Cove. She knew precisely how to get the very best out of her Herreshoff 12. When I crewed for her she might say, "pull in the jib sheet, one inch." And she didn't mean an inch-and-a half, either. As you might suspect, she won or lost races by inches.

As a young child, I just accepted these eccentricities as part of the mysterious nature of grownups. By my early teens, though, when I knew everything and parents were an

embarrassment, and occasionally the target of ridicule, I'm sorry to say, I was baffled by the fact that they won so many races, and each of them seemed to win about the same number. It took years to move beyond my teenage "know-it-all" phase far enough to understand and appreciate what was really going on:

My mother didn't win races by yelling a lot; she won because she was a good tactician who knew where to be at crucial times, and the best way to get there.

My father didn't win races by chasing wild-fowl around the harbor. He won by noticing things that others didn't. In that duck race, for instance, he'd noticed ripples on the water a hundred yards beyond the duck, recognized a wind shift, and rode it all the way to the finish line. Five minutes ahead of everyone else.

Aunt Polly didn't win races by having her crew pull in the jib sheet by an inch; she won by putting in the hard work that it takes to learn the idiosyncrasies of her boat and the harbor.

Of course, we all have different gifts and different ways of doing things, and of course one approach isn't necessarily better or worse than another, it's just different.

Accepting that reality can be hard for me, though. Take the road work outside, for instance. There are lots of times when I'm sure I could do a better than the DOT. Why dig up that piece of sidewalk three times just to lay a few lengths of pipe? Why leave that hundred yard strip of Route 1 graveled for a week after the rest of the road is paved? It's a chore to step back and remind myself that maybe I'm too focused on that metaphorical duck to see the big picture of what the DOT is doing.

Just as our fingerprints are unique, each of our brains with all their synapses are like nobody else's. Recent brain research has shown that our senses and ways of thinking are subtly different, and truly unique.

Some people, for example, love the sound of bagpipes, while others cover their ears. Some love violin music, while others hear fingernails on a blackboard. Some people's palates like the taste of Brussel sprouts or haggis, while others don't. Now wonder we don't always get along.

I don't think God created all this diversity by accident. I think He intended it as both a blessing and a challenge. A blessing because the world would be pretty dull if everybody was exactly the same, and a challenge for us to learn how live with our differences. It seems to me that we're often timid in our thinking as a society. Instead of seeing differences of thought as a blessing to be embraced, a chance to explore new ideas; we see differences as a threat to be pushed away - which leads me to today's Gospel.

The various commentaries on today's passage argue that the implied criticism of Gentiles and tax collectors, plus the use of terms like, "evidence" and "witnesses" are too legalistic to be the words of Jesus. This back-handed comment about lawyers inspires me to speak up on behalf of the legal profession.

In a recent editorial for Time magazine, Heather Gerken, the Dean of Yale Law school, pointed out that law school campuses have mostly escaped the violent

protests that we've seen at other colleges. She attributes that to the law school curriculum, which requires students not only to present their own arguments, but to also present the best arguments of the other side, thereby forcing them to see the world as their opponents do. There is nothing, she said, more humbling than that. We should, she concluded, fight hard for our own values, while recognizing the best in the other side and the worst in ours.

I think today's Gospel and Gerken's essay say a lot about living in a community where we don't always see eye-to-eye.

In Matthew, Jesus tells us to talk one-on-one with the person we disagree with, not as a confrontation, but a conversation, to try and repair, or "regain," as the passage says, the relationship.

If that doesn't work then we should find one or two others to go with us. Here's where things get interesting for me, because there's a complex transaction hidden away in those few words: First, I have to find one or two people who share my viewpoint, which means bouncing my opinion off others. But suppose my friends happen to be Episcopalians? In that case I'll probably get half a dozen different viewpoints. They might even convince me that *I'm* the one who's wrong. Maybe they'll show me that I'm looking at a duck and not a shift in the wind.

But suppose my friends do agree with me, and even all of us aren't able to bring about a change of heart. Then Jesus tells us to go to the church, and seek reconciliation in a community of Christ.

If that doesn't work, then the other person is to be treated as a Gentile or a tax collector. This might sound harsh, but we know that Jesus cares about Gentiles and tax collectors, just like he cares about us. They weren't hopelessly beyond the pale; forgiveness and acceptance was always open to them.

I think Jesus' ultimate goal in the passage is clear - to strengthen our relationships with each other. To seek reconciliation, not confrontation.

Abraham Lincoln summed up Jesus' challenge to us nicely when he said, "I don't like that man. I must get to know him better."

We constantly make choices in our daily lives. The easy choice is the one where I'm right and the other person is wrong - like the road work on Route 1. The problem with that is that it puts me in a binary world of right and wrong, good and bad, black and white, friend and enemy. A world filled with anger and resentment where I end up building a wall of rejection against others, fearful that my thinking will be challenged.

The more difficult choice is to accept, and even welcome the idea that the DOT, or that "other" politician, or maybe our neighbor, all have different, but perfectly valid beliefs.

We can chose to live in a rigid, black and white world, or chose the technicolor life of diversity. Which is more exciting and productive? Which brings us closer to Jesus?

Amen.

