

Pentecost, A

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Somebody may remember a song entitled “Solitaire.” It is about a man who had no room in his life for other people. The chorus of the song captures and conveys the theme with this lyric: “And solitaire’s the only game in town, and every road that takes him takes him down. While life goes on around him everywhere, he is playing solitaire.”

Obviously, the song is a take-off on the card game by the same name. There are several different ways to play it, but the main point is that you play it by yourself. You don’t need a partner or an opponent. Solitaire is a one-person game. And like the man in the song, that is the way some people try to play the game of life. They seek to isolate themselves from social involvement and live their lives strictly on a basis of personal preference.

And let’s be honest enough to admit that all of us at times are tempted with the thought of solitaire. After all, living with other people can be, and often is a complicated and difficult thing to do. So we fight ourselves thinking how nice it would be to just close everyone else out and consider nothing but our own needs and desires.

But that kind of living faces several very serious problems. For one thing, it would be emotionally wrong. For another, it would be emotionally dissatisfying. And finally it is physiologically impossible. Human need of relationship with others is a fact of life, whether we like it or not. You and I cannot close ourselves off from other people, no

matter how hard we may try. The world is too small; its population is too great: and our interdependence is too well established. Life can never be lived as if it was a game of solitude.

The answer to people problems is not isolation, but learning to live together, and that is the topic of one of our scripture readings for today. The church in Corinth was having some difficulty with interpersonal relationships. The membership was torn by strife and conflict. So, Paul included in his letter some basic instructions on the fine art of living together.

Part of what he wrote was local and temporal, dealing with specific problems in Corinth. But the principles with which he dealt are timeless and universal. They are just as relevant today as they were then. Living with other people is essentially the same challenge in the twentieth first century as it was in the first. Whether it is in a church or a community, among friends or family, at school or at work, certain basic principles must be learned and applied.

The first is to accept and respect each other's differences. One of the most obvious facts about the human race, at least the part of it that I know is that no two of us are exactly alike. All of us have certain similarities, of course. Children have many of the same traits as their parents. Brothers or sisters may look and act somewhat alike. Every human being is an original. No one is a copy of someone else. I am not like you; you are not like me. Not only are we dissimilar in appearance,

we also have different thoughts, ideas, opinions, interests, abilities, and values. But this does not mean that one of us is right and the other is wrong. Neither does it mean that we should set out to change each other so that I become like you or you become like me. All it means is that we are different; and in human relationships, that is a perfectly normal state of affairs.

Some of you, from your studies of literature, may remember the story of Procrustes. In Greek mythology, he was a famous robber who owned an iron bed. And it was his belief that this bed was the proper length for all human beings; so every victim that fell into his hands was placed on the iron bed. If the person happened to be shorter than the bed, Procrustes would put him on the rack and stretch him out. Or if he was longer than the bed, he cut him off. Thus the term, “procrustean bed,” has become a symbol for all attempts to standardize human thought and behavior. And I am saying that if you and I are going to live and work together in harmony, the first thing we must do is throw away our iron beds. The secret of human togetherness is not uniformity but understanding. Paul agreed that the Corinthians were different from each other in many ways, but he also suggested that those differences were part of the plan and purpose of God.

So it is with you and me. The main reason we are not alike is because God has endowed each of us with individuality. So, I have no right to try to remake you in my image; nor do you have that right

toward me. People do not have to look, and think, and act alike in order to live together. Instead, we must learn to accept and respect our differences.

The next thing we must do is recognize and emphasize all which we have in common. With all of our differences, there is one great reality that binds us all together, and that is our relationship to God. We all came from God; we all belong to God; and we are all dependent upon Him. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul emphasized this common ground in three separate but similar sentences: “There are different gifts but the same Spirit. There are different ministries but the same Lord. There are different works but the same God. “Then he put it into an unforgettable analogy: “The body is one and has many members; but all of the members, though they be many, are yet one body.” Think of that for a moment. Your body has many separate and distinct parts, but all play a vital role in the total function of the body. Hands and feet, for example, are not at all alike. And it is a good thing they are not, because you need them both and they need each other. Your hands would have a hard time doing their work, if it were not for your feet. And your feet would be limited in their effectiveness, if it were not for your hands. The same can be said of eyes and ears, nose and mouth, arms and legs. All of these distinct members belong to one body and work together for the common good.

Paul applied that analogy to the church in Corinth. Without doing violence to the scripture, we can apply it to our church, or to the universal church, or to any human relationship in which we are involved.

There are two reasons, I think, why the human race has so much difficulty living together. One is because we forget our essential oneness under God; and the other is because we fail to see how much we need each other.

Labor needs management, and management needs labor, and they are all sons and daughters of God. Husbands and wives need each other. Parents and children need each other. Brothers and sisters need each other. And they all belong to the larger family of God.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

These truths sound so simple, and yet they seem so hard to learn. If we could ever get the big picture, then maybe we could respect each other's differences, recognize our basic kinship under God, lay aside our trivial disputes, and start working together for the common good. Life is not a game of solitaire. We cannot play it by ourselves. The only way is cooperation. We must somehow learn to live together. **Amen.**