

[Image of Jim Jones] On November 18, 1978, more than 900 US citizens living in a religious community in Guyana killed themselves when their charismatic leader, a preacher named Jim Jones, told them all to drink grape kool-aid laced with cyanide. Jones didn't lie to them. He didn't trick them. He told them to drink poison and they did it - many of them after feeding it to their children.

The story of the so-called People's Temple is tragic and horrifying, all the more so when you know the larger picture: that the community was some 20 years old, that it had been founded in Northern California in the 1950s as one of the first racially integrated churches (as the Civil Rights movement was just beginning). The People's Temple lived in community, had a national bus ministry and was flourishing, to all appearances.

But as the People's Temple grew, Jones became less and less stable. In fact, he became that classic cult leader - a bunch of weird sexual stuff, fake healings, political corruption. The Temple moved from San Francisco to Guyana because Jones was on the run.

The amazing thing about the tragedy of the People's Temple is *how many people* fell for it. How many people just went along with the increasing madness, up to and including killing themselves.

The Jonestown massacre has become emblematic for a lot of people with the problem with religion. Faith is about brainwashing, about not thinking, not asking questions. Stay in that environment long enough, and eventually you'll do anything they tell you to.

We even use that phrase - "drink the koolaid" to describe people who just fall in line and don't ask questions.

For a lot of us, religion is about conformity, about falling in line, not asking questions, and just doing what the man in charge says. And it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that's a recipe for disaster. Even if it doesn't end in mass suicide (which it usually doesn't), it does create havens for abuse, exploitation and darkness.

Friends, nothing could be further from what God calls us to as a church, as a people. Those who claim religion is about conformity aren't making it up from nowhere... there's language in the Bible that can *sound* like that's God's vision for our world. But we'll see today that the Oneness God calls us to is not a Oneness of conformity. Quite the opposite: God's vision for a united Church is one that embraces and encourages diversity as our path to flourishing.

We are called to a unity that celebrates diversity.

Which doesn't sound very religious, does it? [Illustrate: /^\ a mountain with the right answer at the top] Diversity is about casting a wide net, about having room for different perspectives, about questions, about wrestling together with difference. Religion is about certainty, consensus, about having the one right answer, about everyone arriving at the same place. Not

casting a wide net, but *narrowing*. Religion funnels us all together, insists on right answers that don't leave room for the doubts and questions so many of us have. Religion, in our experience, is more about conformity, about toeing party lines. To claim there's not only room for diversity in the unity of faith seems like an oxymoron.

To claim that the unity of faith embraces diversity sounds like the trendy stuff our culture likes to throw around. But bear with me for a moment: we know what the ugly road insisting on conformity leads us to. So what if it's true? What if faith *doesn't* squelch questions and doubts? What if faith *makes room* for a diversity of perspectives and cultures and lifestyles?

[**Illustration pt. 2 / v \ Heaven coming down to embrace**] Faith is not everyone working really hard to make it to the right answer. Faith is about Heaven coming to Earth, arms open wide, to rescue and redeem *everyone*. Every tribe, nation, culture, people. If the Church is to be the people of God, we must reflect that. This open embrace of difference is scary and difficult.

Since Easter, we've been investigating what Jesus' resurrection means for the Church as God's people. We've called this series Identity Crisis because we've seen again and again how Jesus' resurrection changed everything, invited us into a new way of living. But rather than live fully in Jesus' new way, we're often torn between the life Jesus is calling us to and the habits and patterns we're being called *out of*. Today, we're investigating that tension between conformity and diversity. Between a church that insists everyone be the same and a church with the courage to be different, together. We'll see that God's vision for us is to be unified in love even as we are diverse.

[**Scripture Slide 1**] Turn to Revelation 22 with me... the very end of the book (and of the Scriptures). In the last couple of weeks, we've seen God's plan for creation come to fruition as Heaven and Earth become one and God lives among humanity, fully and completely as was always intended. For the original audience of the Revelation, this was a powerful message of hope. They were living under the heel of the Roman Empire, struggling to be faithful in a faithless world. Revelation shows them God's plan, initiated through Jesus' death and resurrection, to overthrow the powers and reunite Heaven and Earth. I want to read with you John the Revelator's final words, and highlight a final theme John draws together here:

**“Look, I am coming soon, bringing my reward with me to repay all people according to their deeds. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.”**

**Blessed are those who wash their robes. They will be permitted to enter through the gates of the city and eat the fruit from the tree of life. Outside the city are the dogs—the sorcerers, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idol worshipers, and all who love to live a lie.**

**“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this message for the churches. I am both the source of David and the heir to his throne. I am the bright morning star.”**

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." Let anyone who hears this say, "Come." Let anyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who desires drink freely from the water of life. And I solemnly declare to everyone who hears the words of prophecy written in this book: If anyone adds anything to what is written here, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. And if anyone removes any of the words from this book of prophecy, God will remove that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city that are described in this book.

He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon!"

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's holy people. -- Revelation 22:12-21

There is much here, as we would expect. Jesus affirms that he is the first and last, that he will return soon. And - pretty standard for these kinds of apocalyptic books - we get a warning not to edit the contents. And as has been the case throughout the book, there are these two groups of people - the insiders and the outsiders. Here, it's "those who've washed their robes" and those "outside the city".

This is where the conformity talk comes to bear. In the End, there're two kinds of people. Insiders and outsiders. Us and them. If you want *in* (and of course you do because you don't want to be in the lake of fire!), then you have to fall in line. Do as you're told. Don't ask questions. Drink the kool-aid. Because otherwise you end up *out there*.

Everyone dresses in white, so they all look the same. There seems to be this flattening of individuality, a suppression of difference.

That's certainly how Christians have approached faith for a lot of our history. Again and again as Western missionaries spread across the globe, we insisted to the non-Western (non-white) peoples we encountered that it wasn't enough for them to begin to believe in God. They must also become Western, become as White as possible. They had to learn our Western languages, worship in foreign tongues. They had to abandon deeply embedded cultural practices, turn their backs on their peoples, often even take on new names (we called them "Christian" names) all in the name of faith. Faith for those missionaries, looked like conformity. If you want to worship *my* God, you have to look like *me*.

But God is not *my* God, not *our* God. God is God and we are blessed to be this God's people. If we've been paying attention over the last six weeks, we already know in fact that, according to the Revelation, these people in white are *not* being suppressed. Their cultures are not being erased. The people of God is not monochromatic or monocultural. Let's look again:

In Revelation 5, when we meet the lion who is really the slaughtered lamb: **You were slaughtered, and your blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and**

people and nation. And you have caused them to become a Kingdom of priests for our God. -- Revelation 5:9-10

From every tribe and language and people and nation. Every culture is part of God's kingdom. That people shows up again in Revelation 7, again worshiping God. And this time, they're wearing some familiar clothes:

After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. -- Revelation 7:9

This countless multitude whom God has rescued from every nation and tribe and people and language - these are the people dressed in white (which, in the ancient world, was a symbol of victory. These people have overcome the powers of darkness, against all odds).

But the most stunning image comes from the text we looked at last week, the vision of this holy city that is the reunion of Heaven and Earth. In Revelation 21, John tells us that

The city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light. The nations will walk in its light, and the kings of the world will enter the city in all their glory. Its gates will never be closed at the end of day because there is no night there. And all the nations will bring their glory and honor into the city. -- Revelation 21:23-26

The city is filled with God's glory, and all the kings and nations of the world will bring their glory to the city. All the nations of the world will bring their glory to the city.

What is the glory of the British? What is the glory of the Emirates? What is the glory of the Germans? Of the Spanish? Of the Brazilians? Of the Iraqi and Saudis? Of the Americans? Of the Sioux and the Apache and the Iroquois? What is the glory of the Zulu, the Maasai and Yoruba of the African continent? What is the glory of Korea, Japan, of China?

What does it mean that God's vision for the end is for every tribe and nation and tongue to bring the glories of their cultures into the Holy City? What does it look like for every human culture that has ever existed to be celebrated for the unique creativity and beauty they bring to God's kingdom? What does it look like for every person to offer something beautiful to the flourishing of God's people, not because we're all the same, but because we're all different?

The glory of the creator is the endless creativity of the creation. As we all chase our callings, become who we were created to be, and be those persons, live those callings, we bring glory to the one who created us. Parents, it's not unlike when your children excel - that swell of pride you feel - that's the kind of glory we bring to God when we live into our callings.

And that's the glory that will shine throughout the Holy City, when Heaven and Earth are one, when all the nations of the world bring their glory in.

I know that's scary for some of us. It sounds like we just open the doors wide open and anyone who wants to can just come in.

Well, yes. That's exactly the offer God makes - anyone who is thirsty, come drink!

And that's the rub. Those who enter into the Holy City are those who - like Shelley talked about a couple of weeks ago, are those with the courage to love well and be loved well. *That's* the key to this conversation about unity and diversity in the Church. *Love* is the difference between unity and conformity. This is exactly what Jesus modeled for us, and called us to - if you have a Bible, turn with me over to John 17.

[Scripture Slide 2] This is the last night Jesus shared with his followers before he was killed, and this particular passage is at the end of a long conversation Jesus has with the disciples. It's his farewell address (though they don't realize that yet), so these are Jesus' most important instructions. He closes the conversation with a powerful, beautiful prayer over his followers. I want to read with you what Jesus prays over his followers - us (and keep in mind this unity and diversity and conformity conversation):

"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.

"I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me. Father, I want these whom you have given me to be with me where I am. Then they can see all the glory you gave me because you loved me even before the world began!

"O righteous Father, the world doesn't know you, but I do; and these disciples know you sent me. I have revealed you to them, and I will continue to do so. Then your love for me will be in them, and I will be in them." -- John 17:20-26

Jesus prays that we would all be one "as you and I are one." Here Jesus is pointing us toward the mystery at the heart of God: what we call the Holy Trinity. God is three persons in one being - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Three distinct persons who are nevertheless one being. They are unified without being conformed.

And Jesus *invites us into this same oneness*. This is what happens when we join into Jesus' death and resurrection, when we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We become folded into the oneness of the Trinity. This oneness is how the world knows God loves us and we love God, and that oneness is worked out in *how we love each other*.

Not in that we all believe all the same things, or have the same political views. Not that we agree on all the right issues or all act the same or like the same kinds of music. That we *love*.

That's difficult to hear. We have to pause and ask what it means to love in light of this. Does it mean we ignore differences? Pretend none of that matters?

No, not according to Jesus' example. Love isn't ignorance, but embrace. We can see that in the group of people listening to this prayer when Jesus first prayed it.

The disciples were a diverse group - male and female, wealthy and poor, urban and rural. Levi was a tax collector and Simon was a zealot. Tax collectors worked for the occupying Roman government while the Zealots were freedom fighters (or terrorists, depending on your perspective) who advocated violent revolution against Rome and those who worked for them. Can you imagine how tense it got between those two when politics came up?

And Jesus never insists they all conform. Instead, he keeps insisting that this new thing is bursting forth among them, a new movement that transcends all the ways we're different and calls us to be together (but not the same). And that can only happen when we love each other. Love makes us one in the midst of our differences.

We can see it too, though, in the group of people listening to this prayer here, today. Catalyst is male and female. Catalyst is black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American. Catalyst is Republican, Democrat and Sick of the Whole System. Catalyst is people who love Jesus and people who are still figuring it all out. Catalyst is old and young. And Catalyst will never be a place you're asked to check your brain at the door, to be like everyone else, to fall in line, to drink the kool-aid. Because we believe everyone has a God-given calling. We believe Catalyst is better when you're free to live into that God-given calling, to become the person God is calling you to be. And we believe that happens not when you're told to fall in line and do what the man on the stage says, but when you're free to listen to the voice of the Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. Because when you experience the power of this Spirit, you experience the power of resurrection in your life, in your spirit, in your relationships, in your vocation. That resurrection power brings life and as you begin to explore what that life looks like *this is when* God is glorified.

Catalyst is a church of people who are all different, but we're all different together. What binds us together is the love of God, the love that is the very heartbeat of the Holy Trinity, inviting us together to receive robes of victory, washed white in the blood of the slaughtered Lamb. We are part of that countless multitude from every race, tribe, nation and tongue who gathers around the throne of our God in the midst of the Holy City and invites the whole world to join us.

What does it look like for you to embrace diversity this week, to insist that conformity is not the way to life, but rather the difficult road of love?

## **Communion SetUp**