

Oneness in the Church

Ephesians 4 says, “Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness.” But, for most of my life, I was denied that feeling I longed for - a feeling of unity, oneness and compatibility in Christian community. I wasn’t baptized as a child. I was an interracial child born in the early 80s to two first-generation Canadians. This was enough to be told for years and years that I was not welcome at God’s table, as my high school’s chaplain, and many others, so plainly put it.

And so I floundered, searching, for a while. It was hard to find true allies in life who didn’t make my ethnicity or my background an issue in their lives, or even worse, part of a show of how okay they were with race by being friends with someone “mixed”. Those friends I did have never really spoke up for me or supported me if I had a direct encounter with racism.

I found myself fairly isolated from any concept of faith when I got to university. God seemed like an unwelcome entity based on the Christian ambassadors I had encountered in the world. I did, however, meet my husband and was welcomed into his church as his girlfriend. This is where it gets a little awkward because if it hadn’t been for them, I would not even have a start to my faith journey. But, it’s essential that I talk about my experience there, despite the message I learned there, which was “Just leave it be and don’t talk about it.”

My first time there, a beloved church member jokingly said to Chris, “Ah, I see you’ve brought your harem.” I wanted so badly to belong that I laughed it off. I was asked repeatedly, “So, where are you from? I can’t quite place you.” “I’m born in Canada.” “No...your parentage.” “My father is from the Netherlands and my mother is from Hong Kong.” “Oh, I sensed something was strange there.” Strange. Weird. Different. I got all of these.

There’s something that really informs your identity growing up when you come from multiple, very different cultures. You seek belonging from both and don’t always feel acceptance from everyone in either. It left me desperately wanting to belong. So, I continued to go to church with Chris and eventually people learned my name. I went through membership classes and was baptized 14 years ago as an adult. 14. Let that sink in for a moment. Under the more usual faith journey, I’d be in confirmation classes right now. It’s still early in the journey.

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I found Ephesians 4 while studying at Grebel, which would become a touchstone in my faith and my understanding of my place in a Christian community. I worked hard to "...travel the path God was calling me to travel with humility and discipline. We must all stay together, moving in the same direction with one God and Father of all." So what if someone would see my full name in print for the first time and say, "Wait...your last name is Kleingeld?!?! How did THAT happen?" Or, "Really? You look more Pocahontas than Mulan." And that one really hurt, since I love Mulan! There was even the time a couple laughed at photos of me in my wedding cheongsam saying, "Oh, I didn't realize you were THAT Chinese."

Let me assure you there are lots of wonderful members of that congregation who are good friends and really helped me develop as a Christian. They tried to give me a sense of belonging, but also encouraged me to stay quiet. I'd hear: "Why do we even talk about these things?" "Live and let live." "Oh, that's just that person. They don't speak for everyone." "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." "Just ignore them."

Ephesians 4 says, "Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry - but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry. Don't give the Devil that kind of foothold in your life. Watch the way you talk. Let nothing foul or dirty come out of your mouth. Say only what helps, each word a gift."

And so I prayed for calm, understanding, compassion, and the ability to forgive those who didn't see the harm they were doing. But, I could no longer quietly go along. I felt called to act. And I tried, by answering the call to coordinate a youth-driven program. This was a generation of the church that was feeling left out of the church's conversations and decisions, but finding a common voice, a Oneness of their own. They wanted to talk about supporting the LGBTQ+ community. They wanted to raise money for charities supporting the impoverished and displaced. But none of that was one with the church. Instead, we were told we should be helping our own.

"Our own." I went so cold. My drive to live a Christian life evaporated. I had officially been a Christian for only 7 years and I felt so done. Worse, I'd just had my first baby and new comments started.

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“Wow, he’s so white, you’d never know he’s yours.” Or, “You must feel so blessed. Aren’t you relieved he’s passing?”

It was soul crushing. Some of the more supportive and loving members were excited for us and excited to help - and they did. But...I couldn’t do it anymore. I was angry, but my spirit and my connection to the Spirit was shattered because I was angry and couldn’t stop being angry. I realized that being there felt like a non-stop fight, one that I hadn’t realized I was even fighting. The thought of raising my children in a church that had members who picked and pecked and nobody who stood up to do anything about it wore on me. And I realized, if it wasn’t healthy for my kids, then it wasn’t healthy for me either. It was so hard to leave because there were people there I well and truly loved, but they understood. I didn’t say much to anyone else because again, Ephesians 4: “Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly as God in Christ forgave you.”

Forgiveness is so hard to do. I was so tired and I didn’t have the energy to put myself out there right away, so I took a break from the church. God remained a part of my life and I drifted to the occasional service at other churches. I didn’t really know what I was looking for. But, God always has a plan.

A minister friend asked how we were doing. When she heard we were drifting with no church home and that I was struggling without a supportive community, she went searching for a place that would be a good fit for us. She gave me a list of three places, but insisted I wasn’t likely to look beyond the first. All she said was, “The music there will speak to you.” The first on the list was Parkminster.

This is the first place where I’ve felt we’re safe and supported. It’s the first place where, as I think back on the last 4 or 5 years, I’ve never once encountered racism or even prejudiced assumptions about my background. My kids are accepted for who they are and nobody asks me what they are or whose they are. And it’s in that safety that I’ve been able to go back and really reflect on what Paul’s intention was when he called the Ephesians to action in his epistle.

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“Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. BUT that doesn’t mean you should all look and speak and act the same. I had focused on just this part, but there is more to this vital chapter. It goes on, “No prolonged infancies among us, please. We’ll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love - like Christ in everything.”

I had been so focused on being One with a church that I hadn’t stopped to consider the path I was traveling. My relationship with God, albeit highly sought after, wasn’t a healthy relationship as long as I focused on being One in a way that blindly followed.

Going along with the crowd is the easy choice, but it’s not what Paul calls us to do. Not even here at Parkminster. We have a welcoming congregation that provide safety, security, and support to those who are made to feel other - excluded or even set upon by the world around them. We **are** permeated with oneness. You might even say we are...United.

In short, we are in the best crowd we could choose to follow...the safest place to revert to a prolonged infancy. But, we still must reflect on situations for ourselves and continue coming together as one church. We need to listen when someone is angry and have the hard conversations with each other. We need to notice when a group is pulling in a different direction and understand why. We need to have respect for the diverse groups of our church including those whose voices may be muted or silenced - people of colour, youth, and vulnerable groups. We need to look for those who live in ignorance and need to hear the truth - that in Christ we’re all connected to each other. And even beyond that, we are all connected as members of the larger human race.

When we each take steps to follow Christ’s lead, we find ourselves walking - or better yet, running - together as One. Thanks be to the Creator Spirit, who guides our hearts and our faith in community, united as one in Christ. Amen.