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Unity through Tension

by Jan Wood

The glory which thou hast given me I have given them,
that they may be one even as we are one,
I in them and thou in me,
that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that thou hast sent me
and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.
John 17:23

I am deeply troubled by the seemingly unending fragmentation of the Body of Christ. The mantra of American Christians seems to be to find your position and take a stand. Faithfulness demands it. Yet Jesus' words in John 17 burn deeply in my spirit. Jesus is saying that the proof of faithfulness and the demonstration that Jesus is sent from God is that we broken humans gathered in communities of faith become one with one another as Jesus and God are one. Frankly, I reel with dismay at how far from the mark we are in practice; and in theory, we don't even value unity as a core commandment of our Lord. Clearly this cannot be achieved by organizational expertise. This is a miracle. Only God can gather a motley crew of diverse humans and transform us into a blessed community moving in love and unity.

For many years, I assumed that this miracle would bring groups into a unity of opinion. We would start with diversity and be drawn to a singular way of viewing things. But I have changed my mind. Increasingly the Spirit has been opening to me the concept of unity being held together by tensions. . . .



As I observe the created world, I see the principle of tension all around me. Weightlessness is held in tension with gravity. Balance is a tension that keeps me from leaning too far one way or another. Those of you who play stringed instruments know that tension is essential to beautiful sound. If the strings do not have enough tension, there is no music or proper pitch. However, if the strings have too much tension, they snap and break.

The image that has been very fruitful in my reflections has been the sewing machine. Look at any seam in the garment that you are wearing. Notice the stitches that are even on either side of the seam. Notice that these stitches hold the garment together and make it functional. You may see other stitches that reinforce a seam that comes under stress and make it stronger. You may see still other stitches that are decorative and create beauty and design.



The principle of the sewing machine that made these stitches is that different threads—held in tension—come from opposite directions. They interlock and return to their opposite resting places. They move together, interlock and move apart with such speed and precision that it functions like one unified machine. And in fact it is. The machine is in unity and functions smoothly although the moving parts are oppositional. If there is not enough tension, the stitches become loop-de-loops that cannot create a seam and are useless. If there is too much tension, the thread puckers and snaps—and the seam is broken and useless. If either the spool of thread or the bobbin refuses to meet and engage and interlock, the machine is useless.

Since Jesus brought this image into my awareness, I have found a new appreciation and respect for folks who bring very different opinions, perspectives and convictions into the process of trying to be faithful people of God. Something is not *wrong* because we see things differently. Something is very right! We are gift to one another—a spool and a bobbin. And though we can't see it with our naked eye, we are a miracle waiting to happen as we learn to move toward one another—in full integrity of our positions and knowings—to find the place that the Holy Spirit would have us engage and interlock. And while it might feel freeing to have everyone agree with me and sail through the community with no halts, we would not be creating a sturdy garment capable of demonstrating the miracle that Jesus is Lord and has come to change the arrangement of human endeavor. And conversely, there is a strange satisfaction in breaking fellowship with those who disagree while feeling smugly “right.” But to do so snaps the thread of God's intentions for us.

I experientially am learning how powerfully sweet it is to accept the polarities of those in our communities of faith and be part of being formed and shaped by the Holy Spirit. I am aware that the process feels clumsy and messy when lived out in real life. But as the sewing machine can't function without regular oiling, our movements are lubricated by love, tender heartedness, forgiveness, gentle spaciousness for our and others foibles and incompleteness, and willingness to let Christ to move us as Christ wishes. And we get to be co-partners with Christ in creating the holy garment called the Church.

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