

“Is It Really Possible ...?”

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Romans 12:18

Ephesians 4:3, 25-32

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Introduction

- A. I ask myself often the question, “Is it possible – really possible – to live in peace in the midst of diversity on the Mount Vernon Nazarene University campus?”
- Is it possible on our campus to live and relate to each other as Christians so that we increasingly reflect the Kingdom of God . . . on earth?
 - If we have difficulty living as Christians together on this campus with very little cultural diversity, how will we adjust to life together in heaven?
 - Ponder with me a moment this interesting perspective on the world in microcosm.

According to information adapted from a Stanford University School of Medicine faculty member, if we could shrink the earth’s population to a village of precisely 100 people with all the existing human ratios remaining the same, it would look something like the following:

There would be:

57 Asians	80 live in sub-standard housing
21 Europeans	70 unable to read
14 from Western Hemisphere	50 suffer from malnutrition
8 Africans	One near death
52 are female	One near birth
48 are male	One a college education
70 are non-white	One would own a computer
30 are white	

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Compressing global Christianity to a village of precisely 100 people would provide some different numbers. Yet reflecting on the phenomenal degree of cultural diversity within the Christian family worldwide would be fascinating!

- B. Now back to my question. “Is it possible – really possible – to live in peace in the midst of the increasing cultural diversity at MVNU even as we acknowledge MVNU’s diversity is so very small in comparison to the global profile mentioned above?”

I am passionate about this question because one of the beatitudes states: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons (and daughters) of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

- Paul states in Romans 12:18: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”
- The “peace” to which I am referring is also mentioned in Ephesians 4:3 – “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” What does this verse mean to you?

- Actually, the word “peace” is the Hebrew word for “shalom” and carries the idea of “wholeness” or “at-one-ness” in attitude, actions and words. The word suggests an inner tranquility – a synergy - within the individual and within the broader faith community.
- C. This broad concern of living together as Christians in the midst of cultural diversity has captured my attention since 1978 when I moved to Europe to teach at the European Nazarene College.
- In that rather small theological institution, students came from the northern European countries of Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, and also from the southern countries of Portugal, Spain, and Italy. Very different cultures! (By the way, we have two students from European Nazarene College with us this semester – Philip Zimmermann from Germany and Marian Golea from Romania).
 - I began rather soon at European Nazarene College to ask the question, “How can we live together as Christians in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”
 - The pursuit of this question continued in Asia where I served with students from highly developed countries economically (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand) and students from underdeveloped countries economically such as India, Indonesia, Philippines.
 - It did not take me very long in 1989 at MVNU to discover the rich diversity and conflicting expectations associated with this campus – between faculty and students, faculty and administration, Christians and non-Christians, the academically gifted and the academically challenged, the campus community and the regional constituency of the sponsoring denomination of this university.
- D. With such diversity, differences of opinion, conflict of ideas, degrees of maturity/immaturity, varieties of traditions, and the uniqueness of cultures and the numerous expressions of subcultures on campus, we ought to expect lively interaction.
- What results far too often, have been:
 - personality clashes,
 - one group pitted against the other,
 - an intolerance of ideas, and
 - impossible expectations demanded.
 - These actions characterize us at our worst.

At our best, however, we are characterized by our theological mentor, John Wesley, who said, “If your heart is right as my heart is right, then give me your hand. You are my brother, my sister in Christ.”

Let me pause for a moment and share with you several ways in which diversity on the MVNU campus is reflected.

There is **“faith” diversity**. Christians study at MVNU as well as students who do not profess Christ as their Lord and Savior. The Christians on campus enjoy the chapel services, Wednesday evening His Story services, open altar and Bible studies. However, we, as believers, must not look judgmentally on students who do not yet share our Christian faith.

We may, probably will, differ with the “not yet Christians,” but we must respect them. We must be careful lest our attitudes and actions against them drive them further from the faith. All students – Christians and non-Christians – are created in God’s image and worthy of respect. In fact, we must increasingly develop a culture of respect for others ... in chapel services, in residence facilities, in the classrooms, and even for the campus facilities and grounds.

Even when “unbelief” compels some to do and say things not consistent with Christian faith or the policies of the University, the manner in which discipline is measured or the attitude displayed when discussing the differences can be just as important as the issue itself.

There is **theological diversity**. For instance, the Board of Trustees expects MVNU faculty, administration, and students to be guided by polity, policies and procedures consistent with the Church of the Nazarene. Yet, this expectation has not been translated to imply “exclusiveness” or sectarianism. Rather, the attitude of this institution from the beginning has been to respect Christians from other denominations even as we may differ theologically.” I have graduate degrees from United Methodist and United Presbyterian institutions, as well as from Nazarene Theological Seminary.

And we have **cultural diversity**. In our student body, we have students from Germany, Romania, Korea, Dominican Republic, Canada, Jamaica, Nigeria, Switzerland, Peru, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Hungary and France. Get to know them. They can enrich your lives. You can bless them with kindness and courtesy. Be careful what you say or the way you talk to other students who are culturally different from you.

We also have a great group on campus of “Diversity Leadership Scholars,” many of them from large urban communities. We can learn much from them even as they benefit from studying in rural Knox County, Ohio!

I yearn for our campus to be known for her Christian hospitality. Hospitality, according to Christine Pohl is “a practice that integrates respect and care.” Through expressing biblical hospitality, the Christian cares for the well being of the guest whose dignity as a human being he/she honors and respects.

- E. Again, back to my question. “Is it possible - in the midst of such diversity on campus, differences of opinion, degrees of maturity/immaturity, challenges of the academically gifted and academically at-risk, the varieties of theological traditions, the unique cultures, and the numerous expressions of subcultures - really possibly, to live together as Christians in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”

- Is it possible to live in shalom on campus and increasingly reflect the Kingdom of God on earth?
- Can we live in such a way that our attitudes, words, and actions reflect Kingdom ethics as summarized in Matthew 5-7?

F. My answer is a resounding YES.

- I stake my tenure as president of MVNU on a radical belief in the possibility of a unqualified YES to these questions.
- I base my response and my passionate pursuit of these questions on the New Testament book of Ephesians, chapter four.

YES, it is possible to live in shalom in this increasingly diverse Christian community if, as Christians on campus,

I. WE RELATE TO EACH OTHER AS BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST (4:25).

- A. We are so tempted to judge when other Christians are different from us.
- We evaluate and respond to others so often only from our perspective, our strengths, or traditions, our background.
 - The assumption is “My way is the right way.”
- B. What a difference it would make if we approached Christians who differ with us from the basic premise, “You are my brother or sister in Christ” (4:25). Our starting point should be . . . as Wesley . . . “If your heart is right as my heart is right, then give me your hand.”
- “Do not lie” (4:25). Do not tell falsehoods. (Remember Paul is speaking to Christians.)
 - Speak truthfully (4:25) – refer to Ephesians 4:15 . . . “in love.” Be honest with compassion.
- C. My basic conviction is this: all of us (faculty/staff/students) are here by God’s design – regardless of where we are on our own spiritual journey. We affirm:
- God’s prevenient grace – His “wooing” us to Himself even when we are running from him; His redeeming and purifying grace, and His keeping and sustaining grace in our lives. And, God is not finished with any of us yet!
- D. Watch the cynicism that so often is targeted toward other Christians. What I say to Christians, I urge non-Christians to embrace.
- Watch your cynicism.
 - As Christians, we must begin with the premise that if the other person professes faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, he/she is my brother or sister in Christ.

Secondly, it is possible to live in peace in this increasingly diverse Christian community if, as Christians on campus,

II. WE MANAGE OUR CONFLICTS CONVICTIONALLY AND CHRISTIANLY (4:27).

- A. Again, “How can we manage conflict in such a way that our ongoing relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ?”
- We often set ourselves up for potential conflict.
 - This institution is sponsored by one denomination, yet aggressively pursues students from other denominations – over 40 different denominations on campus this semester.
 - And even if all of the students from the sponsoring denomination and over 40 other denominations are Christians, there are genuine differences about the meaning and lifestyle of our Christian faith.
 - And, as mentioned earlier, not all students profess faith in Jesus Christ.
 - Some students have grown up in the church, and for various reasons have rebelled or turned their back on Christianity.
 - Others are being exposed significantly to the Christian beliefs and lifestyles for the first time.
 - Christian faith and local church involvement are really “new” to you.
 - By the way, it is my fervent prayer that every student in every academic program will come to a vibrant, faith relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of his/her life.
- B. Conflict, according to David Augsburg, is neutral, natural, and normal. How we deal with it is the issue.
- Deal with conflict “before the sun goes down” (4:27). Be immediate. Pursue truth and Biblical principles convictionally and passionately. Don’t procrastinate.
 - But don’t “sling mud” or engage in “character assassination” as you pursue your convictions.
 - Manage the conflict in a Christianly manner (“in your anger do not sin”) (4:27).
 - See 4:2-3: “Be completely humble and gentle: be patient, bearing with one another in love. And make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”
 - We do not have to deny our vocational roles to deal with conflict Christianly.
 - I am the university president. I must work with faculty, staff, students, and parents.
 - I don’t leave my Christian “hat” outside my office when I must deal decisively with a faculty member who has violated a signed MVNU contract, a staff member who is dismissed because of an inability to meet work expectations, or a student who wants me to change the DNA of this institution.
 - God help us to increasingly understand how to manage our conflicts convictionally and Christianly.

Thirdly, it is possible to live in peace in this increasingly diverse Christian community if, as Christians on campus,

III. WE CONVERSE WITH OTHERS USING UPBUILDING AND ENCOURAGING WORDS. (4:29).

- A. An alum told me recently that somewhere in all my sermons, I spoke about the significance of our words spoken to each other. Right! Because . . .
- Dialogue is a sacrament in the New Testament (Eph. 4:29). In all conversation, the choice of language and subject matter should “minister grace” to the hearer.
 - In Biblical anthropology, the mouth is representative of the whole body and reveals the whole person.
 - Jesus said, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.”
 - In the book of James these words are found: With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the image of God.” (3:9)
- B. For Paul, words should communicate grace. Our words should . . .
- Focus on building others up – not tearing them down.
 - Focus on encouragement – not discouragement.
 - Focus on healing – not hurting.
 - Focus on caring – not indifference.
 - Focus on others in the conversation – not upon yourself.
- Basic question – “When people leave my presence, do they feel better or worse about themselves, God, others, their work?”
- C. I thrive on this insight into servant leadership – “A servant leader is one who gets excited about helping other people succeed.” Our words are the primary vehicle through which this takes place.
- D. Verse 30 – “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit of God is deeply concerned about the speech of His people.
- Our words must be upbuilding and encouraging!

Fourthly, it is possible to live in peace in this increasingly diverse Christian community if, as Christians on campus,

IV. WE FREELY FORGIVE AND ACCEPT FORGIVENESS (4:32).

- A. The big question is HOW to forgive.
- Jesus provides for us a clue: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”
 - Jesus took the initiative in extending forgiveness.
- B. What was the result of His initiative?
- It did not change the situation (they continued to kill Him).
 - It did not change the people (they were just as angry after He spoke the words of forgiveness).
 - It did not result in less physical agony for Jesus (he felt the spear in His side, the nails in His hand).
- C. His words of forgiveness had no impact, apparently on people and things outwardly.
- But His words of forgiveness had a profound impact on Him inwardly.

- Jesus was saying, in effect, “I will not permit their words and deeds to create within me bitterness and resentment toward the Father. It is simply not worth it!”
- We are not to harbor bitterness, slander or resentment. Rather, we must forgive even as Christ forgave us.

In conclusion

- A. The first two verses of the following chapter states: “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Ephesians 5:1-2 Ephesians, chapter four outlines a holiness lifestyle in our relationships with other Christians and non-Christians. God is a God of grace and mercy, and calls us in chapter five to live this way in relation to others within the faith community. Let’s remember this truth in our relationships with others who may be different from us.
- B. Again, the questions. “How can we live together as Christians in such a way that our relationships are redemptive and a witness to unbelievers of the reconciling work of God in Christ? “Is it really possible to live in peace at MVNU?”
- C. Remember this verse: Romans 12:18: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, to live at peace with everyone.”

It is possible, I believe, to live in shalom on campus and to increasingly reflect the Kingdom of God on earth as we

- relate to each other as brothers and sister in Christ.
- manage our conflicts convictionally and Christianly.
- converse with others using upbuilding and encouraging words.
- forgive others freely and accept forgiveness from them.

- D. The prayer of St. Francis of Assisi is our closing prayer. I want my life to be increasingly characterized by shalom, and our campus community to increasingly reflect the Kingdom of God on earth. You are dismissed at the close of this prayer. If however, you want to pray before you leave the chapel for your next class, I encourage you to join me at the altar.

*Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light; and
Where there is sadness, joy.*

*Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood as to understand;
To be loved as to love;*

*For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*