

Sisters and Brothers by Other Mothers

Bishop Teresa Jefferson-Snorton

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. ¹² But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. ¹⁵ As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd. (John 10:11-16, NKJV)

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of my thoughts in the form of this lecture around the current ecumenical work that rests in our hands as the Protestant Church. It has been a privilege to serve during the past year as President of Churches Uniting in Christ, an ecumenical organization whose history spans more than 50 years. I have learned much about and much from the opportunities we have and the challenges we face in the ecumenical movement.

My first exposure to ecumenical world was as a teenager serving on the Youth Council of the Kentucky Council of Churches in my home state. Through that work and through the influence of two great CME Ecumenists—Bishop Nathaniel Linsey and Bishop Thomas Hoyt, my appreciation of the need for Christians to transcend their own limited

denominational definitions of what it means to be a part of the body of Christ was formed. I am grateful to be part of a denomination, The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, who places a high priority on our ecumenical relationships. It is a delight to represent our Church as its Ecumenical Officer.

Today, I have selected a text from John 10, as the basis of my message. I want to give focus to verse 16 *“¹⁶ And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.”* For me, this statement attributed to Jesus, as he taught his disciples, is a foundational statement of ecumenism—“other sheep I have which are not of this fold,” “there are others that I claim,” “you are not the only ones.” Jesus reminds us that as the body of Christ, we are all part of a large, vast extended family, that we literally have “sisters and brothers by other mothers.”

The ecumenical movement in America has made considerable process since the emergence of the Campbell and Stone movements in the early 1800s as resistance to the rigid denominationalism of that day. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been a persistent advocate for Christian unity—in fact the desire for unity of the body of Christ is why the denomination was founded. As your founders and others called for unity, progress was made, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

Yet, the work continues because the goal of unity eludes us. Jesus’ words for us to know that there are other sheep continue to compel us to move forward. In doing so, let us attempt to reflect on some basic questions today. Who are we to one another? What should be the nature of our relationship? What are some of the current challenges to Christian unity? What is a way forward?

WHO ARE WE TO ONE ANOTHER?

Family systems imagery and concepts can help us to better grasp what I would consider the gospel call to know that there are other sheep and to embrace one another as “sisters and brothers” in Christ, not just because it sounds good, but because this is a pillar of our identity as the Christian Church. However, it is a concept that we still wrestle with because though we call ourselves “family,” the truth is that we have become so silo-ed and pre-occupied in our own cul-de-sacs of denominational separatism, our ecumenical work often resembles nothing more than a periodic family reunion, where we renew old relationships and meet new relatives, but do nothing more beyond the event to weave these old and new relationships into our daily lives.

In his book “The American Church that Might Have Been,” Dr. Keith Watkins recalls the work of COCU (the Consultation on Church Union). “Throughout the Consultation’s history, most of its churches received members from other churches on the basis of their baptism in the other church, received members from other churches at Holy Communion, and recognized the ordinations that

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had been performed in the other churches. Even so, these churches tended to live as separated communities of faith, rarely sharing in sacramental relations with one another.”¹ These words convict us today and reveal the incompleteness of our work towards unity.

If the future of the ecumenical movement is to have greater meaning and impact, it will be dependent upon our willingness and commitment to stop just “visiting” with one another, to stop being content with the period “family reunion” and figure out more consistent ways to “live together in community.”

This is particularly necessary at the local level where the witness of the Christian Church is needed to affect the lives of real people with real problems and a real need for the liberating, empowering gospel of Jesus Christ. All of our denominations are also threatened by diminishing congregations, declining memberships and limited resources while the need for spiritual grounding grows exponentially. The future of the ecumenical movement is dependent upon us to accept and live with one another authentically as “sisters and brothers” and not as distant relatives, allowing Jesus, through us, to draw men and women to him.

THE FIRST CHALLENGE—FAMILY ORIGINS

If we are indeed “sisters and brothers”, albeit by “other mothers”, what then should be our relationship to one another? From time to time we hear of a news story about a man who has two different families, each unknown to the other, in

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different parts of town, or in another city or state. Often, it is because of the man’s death that the two families learn about the other’s existence, with shock, surprise and often anger. Each “wife” would say “Well, I knew he was gone a lot, but I never imagined he had another family.”

Once while serving as chaplain, I sat with the children of a dying man who had two families. One of the young adult children said to me, “well the biggest surprise in all of this is that I have sisters and brothers by another mother.” His conflicting emotions were evident as he spoke.

Our western culture tends to offer harsh critique of a man like this, citing the deception and lies that must have been involved in maintaining this dual life. Often, it is the children who suffer the most from

this judgement, being labeled, “illegitimate” or “bastards” or other uncomplimentary labels. We are hardly tolerant of these models of family that challenge our neat, monogamous, nuclear family models.

But in the reality of these post-modern times, while not always in the extreme of two separate and unknown-to-one-another families that exist simultaneously, the number of families who fall into the category of blended, remarried or reconstituted continues to rise daily. The reality of having or becoming sisters and brothers by other mothers is quite common. In the therapeutic world, we advocate for and attempt to facilitate the health of such families by encouraging acceptance and inclusion in these new kinds of families.

The church could benefit from a fundamental shift to a healthier, more robust posture of acceptance and inclusion. Through years of ecumenical work, and

through organizations like Consultation on Church Union, Churches Uniting in Christ, National Council of Churches, Christian Churches Together and many others, thankfully we at least know of each other’s existence and realize at some level our kinship.

However, the challenge before us is whether and how far we have moved from tolerance and simple acceptance, to a position of inclusion, not just in doctrinal or organizational ways, but in our core beliefs about who we are as the body of Christ. Have we put so much emphasis on the doctrinal and organizational constructs and failed to absorb a basic truth about our origins.

Family systems theory identifies several types of families. Three primary family types due to origin are: a. the *consanguine* family—those related by blood, b. the *conjugal* family—those who become family by marriage and c. the *affinity* family—those

relationships we form by choice, usually with those with whom we have something in common. I want to suggest that the primary challenge for ecumenism is the need to shift from thinking of ourselves as family by virtue of our *affinity* to one another as Christians. Even our traditional efforts at unity through covenants and bi-lateral agreements are great efforts at marrying one another—becoming *conjugal* families—are not enough. Christian unity is necessary because we are family by virtue of our blood relationship—*consanguine* family.

If we claim to be new creatures in Christ through our baptism and redemption of the suffering and shed blood of Jesus Christ, then we are blood relatives. Sisters and brothers, though by other mothers. Not distant relatives, not cousins, once or twice removed, but sisters and brothers who share a common progenitor, a common ancestor, a common parent, descendants of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this is what Jesus wanted us to know when he spoke these words in John 10: 16 “And other sheep I have that are not of this fold.” He was saying to the church of then and now, that while we can claim kinship as sisters and brothers in his name in the worshipping communities, churches or denominations where we hold membership, we also have sisters and brothers by other mothers.

ANOTHER CHALLENGE OF THIS REALITY — EQUALITY

While it seems easy to grasp this concept and affirm it without question, it is quite another thing to live as if we fully embrace it. There are several challenges before us, even if we agree that we are sisters and brothers. First, we have the simple problem of birth order. As the oldest sibling in my natural family, I must acknowledge that I often think of myself as more experienced, more informed, more prepared than my younger siblings. I see myself as the “boss of them” because of the privilege of being the first-born. As a member of the first of my father’s three

different families with children, I also see myself as having a special relationship with my father, due if nothing else but longevity. Unless I wrestle with and manage these feelings of entitlement, I am subject to think that my siblings have less to offer than I, are less skilled or equipped than I, or somehow simply inferior to me, just because of when they happened to become part of the family.

This dynamic in ecumenism holds the same danger for us. When Jesus reminds us that he has other sheep, he offers no indication as to whether those sheep became “sheep” before or after the ones to whom he was speaking. There is no paternal “look after your little sister and brother sheep” in his words. Instead there is an implied equality about the “other sheep,” again, I would pose that Jesus is saying you have other “sisters and brothers in my name,” not less than you, but equal to you. This posture of acceptance of our equality with one another at the ecumenical table could liberate us in a way that we can only imagine, if this were to become the way in which we see one another denominationally. The need to subordinate some denominational traditions and elevate others purely based on length of existence (our birth order) or any chronological, numerical or linear modality that implies superiority is contrary to the notion of a God who continues to reveal himself in new ways in every generation and in the present age. Any refusal to accept that my younger siblings have value to add to any family endeavor is a denial of a God who also reveals God’s self differently and uniquely to each one of us.

Everything we bring to the ecumenical table—our history, our traditions, our polity—are of equal value. They emerged out of a divine inspiration and interpretation of God working in the world at a particular time. Our tendencies to evaluate, judge, criticize, reject or dismiss our differences is a denial of God’s diversity. We will be imprisoned by clinging to our sectarianism and denominationalism if our way is viewed as the “right” way or the “only”

way when we have the opportunity to be liberated by God's call to live together in a new reality that we can trust God to inspire and create.

Theologically, we are challenged to see ecumenical work and Christian unity as something we can

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accomplish! We must live in pregnant anticipation of what God could birth next through us and through future generations of the family. In our siloed comfort zones of denominational life, it seems that we would prefer the family stay the same familiar one, when God is calling us to embrace the rich diversity of our own "sisters and brothers by other mothers".

THE OTHER CHALLENGES—LEGITIMACY AND FORGIVENESS

Beyond the concept of being "sisters and brothers," the concept of "other mothers" might help us grasp the additional challenges before us ecumenically in the 21st century post-modern world. If we could more robustly accept the origin of our blood kinship and the equality of all members of the body, there remains one other significant challenge to the ecumenical movement in America. Most ecumenical conversations in the United States that seek to be inclusive on all levels eventually must deal with the dynamics of race and ethnicity and their impact on the evolution of the Christian Church in America. While there are many issues around racial and ethnic diversity, I must focus on the "black/white" issue for a moment.

Without belaboring you with details already known about this racial struggle in our country, permit to simplify the discussion around the ideas of legitimacy and forgiveness. Demographically, we must first buy into the notion that "African-

American" as an ethnic race is a construct unique to America and the slave experience. Further, we must acknowledge that the origin of this new racial identity is the result of the adulterous behavior of European Christians who held slaves (since racially mixed marriages were rare and prohibited). While

there are a few African-Americans whose biological lineage is purely African, many more are of mixed heritage, mainly with Euro-white-Caucasian descendants. The DNA

ancestry analysis company, 23&Me, recently reported that on average, African-Americans in the United States are only 73.2% African.²

A few years ago, I was at the Ancestry Center maintained by the Church of Latter Day Saints in Salt Lake City. I was delighted when after painstaking research of many documents, I found the names of my paternal great-grandparents and their children, including my grandfather, listed on the 1910 US Census. I was shocked when I read in the column labeled "race," that they were listed as "mulatto." While I had heard the stories of my family of origin, which included being related to the white "Snowden" family, it was surreal to see this simple word in print, and digest its meaning for me as a person who identified herself as "African-American."

My point is this, the African-American ethnic race is primarily the result of state-sanctioned sexual violence against and violation of the bodies of black slave women. The results are mulatto children, who were ambivalently embraced and loved by slave mothers, denied by their white biological fathers, and resented by the wives of those fathers. We know that this "system of abuse" was condoned by the church in America through her silence on the issue of slavery and civil rights for hundreds of years. The implied "illegitimacy" of African-Americans is a factor that has continued to be passed from generation to generation in the psyche of American history.

The inability to accept African-American as full and legitimate citizens of the United States is linked to this painful history. The presence of the illegitimate child had to be tolerated by white women, who had to continue to live as if the unfaithfulness did not occur. For many of you, this concept will be a stretch, but if you allow me to stay with the family systems metaphor, I want to suggest that to truly achieve a spirit of ecumenicity, we must acknowledge this truth. In our psycho-social-political construct in 2017, the question of race and the legacy of this history become the linchpin that creates some of the greatest barriers and opposition to ecumenism.

The “elephant in the room” is one that must be named and confessed. It is the mark and stain of sin on the American church. It is so deep in our legacy that we will never really “get over it,” just like the crucifixion is so fundamental to our understanding of Christianity, we would never say its time to move past that fact. But we can move forward despite the brokenness and woundedness. We can move in forward although the some of the scars of injury are scabbed over, some are still raw and some are infected and potentially deadly.

My white sisters and brothers must choose to become better acquainted with this history and the lingering impact it has on African-Americans today. You must find “racism” believable, even if you have never seen or heard of or experienced it. You must acknowledge that “white privilege” is real and that you benefit from it, directly and indirectly, individually and corporately, even as the Church. You must be willing to challenge this privilege in its modern form, but also to give it up when necessary for the sake of unity.

My black brothers and sisters must accept the burden of having to constantly name and call out conscious and unconscious acts of racism with righteous indignation and not just with hostility and anger. We must acknowledge that even the most

liberal, anti-racist will do or say something that WE consider racist, but that is not cause to walk away from the table, to condemn or judge. When we do this, we not only give up on one another, but we give up on God, “who is able to do exceedingly and abundantly more than we can imagine.”

We all must covenant and recommit to move forward.

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD?

We cannot undo this history, nor erase it away, but as the body of Christ, Jesus shows us a way. The way is “forgiveness.” I cite this not as some pious platitude nor a simple or easy endeavor. It is not easy for a wife to forgive an unfaithful husband. The apology for infidelity is not easy to give, nor is it easy to accept. It is not a one-time thing—trust must be re-earned continuously. Unfaithfulness forever changes the nature of the relationship of a couple. Most importantly, when the offspring of the unfaithfulness—the children of other mothers—are invited to come and live in the house, imagine the tensions that causes. Everyone feels awkward. No one knows how to behave. Shame lurks in the background, with unresolved and unexpressed anger in the shadows. This is how I often feel at ecumenical gatherings that include black and white people. We know we are related, we know we are to love one another—but there’s just that “thing” that we find so hard to talk about.

Our ecumenical future is dependent upon the Church in America coming to terms with her racist past and oppressive history as a constant part of our future life together. We cannot “solve” the race problem—it is a fact. But we must learn how to “live together” if we are to have a future together. We must learn how to have honest dialogue without disarming defensiveness, imposing blame and shame on one another or the desire for us to “just get along” because we are Christians. Asking for forgiveness and offering forgiveness is a part of what we must

learn to do authentically and to do often, so much so that it becomes an automatic part of the way we know we must engage one another.

Jesus reminds us that he has other sheep not of our particular fold. He does not cast them as unequals, nor as one being superior to another. By claiming them as his sheep, he reminds us that the “other sheep” are his legitimate heirs and our consanguine family, through his precious blood and sacrifice for the redemption of the whole world. He doesn’t bother to tell us how they came to be, because he probably knew we would attempt to question their legitimacy, just as the church in Corinth did as it divided and judged each other’s worth and legitimacy as followers of Paul or Apollos.

When we accept one another as consanguine family, we know that we cannot undo that relationship. Conjugal (marital) families can be undone by separation or divorce, affinity families can be undone by simply choosing others over them. In this text, Jesus uses the image of shepherd to illustrate his caring, nurturing relationship to all his sheep. The Church has been called by Jesus to take up this shepherding role. In John 21 (verses 15-17), Jesus uses shepherd language as his response to commend the duties of the shepherd to us as the church: Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.

But Jesus also reminds us that the family is larger than we think—“other sheep I have that are not of this fold.” Jesus is saying there are others for whom I am concerned. There are others for whom we should be concerned, care about, support, because they are our sisters and brothers, albeit by other mothers. The true shepherd, the good shepherd realizes that there are other sheep besides the ones that are most visible. There are other sheep besides the ones assigned exclusively in any shepherd’s care. There are other sheep.....other sisters and brothers, even if they are so by other mothers. This is the call to the ecumenical Church, the unified body of Christ, to be good shepherds, not just the hireling.

The good shepherd knows the sheep by name, the shepherd talks to them and they know the shepherd’s voice. The good shepherd *is in relationship*. In tumultuous times, the shepherd hangs in there, making sure the sheep are safe. The hireling, who has minimal investment, and runs away at the first hint of trouble or conflict or disappointment and through our hands up in defeat. The true shepherd risks his or her life and gives up privilege for the sheep, even those by other mothers.

The ecumenical charge for the Church today is to be a good shepherd, to resist the seduction of episodic instances of pseudo-intimacy with our ecclesial kin and aim instead for authentic, sustaining relationships that understand forgiveness is the constant, core task between us, if true equality and unconditional acceptance are to ever occur.

The ecumenical church as good shepherds know that our responsibilities to the call of Christ extend far beyond those we choose because they are like us in terms race and ethnicity and the myriad of other socio-political constructs that would seek to divide rather than unite us. The ecumenical church as good shepherds know there are other sheep, not of your fold at the local church, other sheep not of your fold as Disciples of Christ, Methodists, Presbyterian, Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics and the number of other ways we identify ourselves. There are other sheep not of our fold be they Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Syrians, Ethiopians; other sheep not of our fold be they heterosexuals or lesbians, gay, bisexuals, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ); other sheep not of our fold be they middle class consumers and owners, or the working poor, the poverty stricken, the least, and the lost, the documented and undocumented, the immigrant and the refugee. Perhaps some of the other sheep not of the fold, are also Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.

There are other sheep not of our fold, but they are our sisters and brothers by other mothers whom we

are called to love and embrace and to live together on this place called Earth. We are called to be advocates for letting justice roll down like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream for all of God's creation!

We are all sisters and brothers of the same God who is calling us to shepherd, as a unified, ecumenical church. Mahatma Gandhi once said "Religions are different roads converging upon the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal."

Today, I say to us, what does it matter that we are sisters and brothers by other mothers, if together we do the will of our father in heaven, preach the good news, proclaim liberty to those that are oppressed and set free those who are bound.

Notes

1. Keith Watkins, *The American Church That Might Have Been: A History of the Consultation on Church Union*, Eugene, OR; Pickwick Publications, p.183.
2. https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/science/23andme-genetic-ethnicity-study.html?_r=0, accessed June 9, 2017.

Bishop Teresa Elaine Jefferson-Snorton became the 59th bishop elected in the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church and the first female bishop. In February 2016 she was elected President of Churches Uniting in Christ, an ecumenical organization representing six Christian denominations working toward unity and reconciliation. She also serves the wider community as Ecumenical Officer and Endorsing Agent for the CME Church, Chair of the Family Life Committee of the World Methodist Council, Chair of the Board of Directors of the National Institute for Human Development, and through membership on the Board of Directors of the World Methodist Evangelism, Inc. and the Pan-Methodist Commission.

