

GROWING Together

10th Anniversary Series

DEMOCRACY, BAPTISM AND GOD

Abortion, balanced-budget legislation, prayers in public schools, rights of gay and lesbian persons: how we understand democracy determines decisions we make every day.

Political scientists say democracy is “people power”, people freely voting in a government and holding that government accountable to the people. Historians say democracy means literally ‘rule by the many’. Representative democracy is a relatively new idea, coming as a form of government only in the 18th century yet modeled on the first and second century Christian church. Feminists say democracy is the power of shared relationships, mutuality, equals working together – especially for justice and peace. Old Testament scholars say democracy means living out the image of God inherent in all people:

*“God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
...and...God blessed them.”* (Gen. 1:27)

This image gives everyone dignity and worth.

“...all one in Christ”

What would Christians say?

We become Christians through baptism. By that baptism in Christ, all human inequalities are abolished. By baptism, all Christians are made radically equal in Christ’s Spirit:

*“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,
there is no longer male and female: for all of you are one.”* (Galatians 3:28)

Each church true to its Christian baptism will regard every member, therefore, as radically equal.



Participation and solidarity, honest openness and inclusiveness are necessarily our trademarks and our tools. Rooted in baptism, these must mark not necessarily church order but most definitely the quality of all church relationships. A bishop may well administer in a democratic way. Every elected congregational committee must ensure it indeed functions democratically.

“...the least of these”

Those equal in Christ, however they are given power, are always responsible for each other and for the others: the outsiders, the powerless, the oppressed. How seriously we live out our equality in Christ is seen in our genuine efforts to empower those who are the least: to enable the outsider to participate fully, to ensure the sincere listening for every voice, and to enable every voice to be genuinely heard.

If any church lived out such equality, what an example for our pain-filled and greedy world!

“...the still small voice”

Yet, that radical equality may not necessarily be Christian. If we are to be a church, our equality must be radical Christian equality.

God’s People are baptized into radical equality. That community of equals must always work to empower the powerless. Yet, God is never limited — to any office, interpretation or decision, or to any majority — not even to the finest community of equals. Our democracy, therefore, must be a democracy lived out in an intimate relationship with God. And God is always God! God is constantly overturning, surprising, challenging, trying to lead us, Christ’s Beloved, forward: hiding in a self-contradictory bush, keeping a whole generation — including their inspired and trained leaders — out of the Promised Land, preferring a tent to a temple, allowing the Chosen People to be overcome by their enemies, empowering an unwed teen to be the mother of Jesus, letting Jesus die, instructing disciples to eat unclean food, and placing the uncircumcised amid God’s People.

Radical Christian equality is never easy! The Bible shows that God’s People constantly “get it wrong”. They built the Golden Calf. They cut out the foreigner. They got caught up in empty religious ritual. They wanted to stone the adulterous woman. They cried for crucifixion. Christians were deaf to Paul’s plea for the uncircumcised. Christians exploited slavery. Christians supported Hitler. Christians suppressed native languages in residential schools. Christians today still have difficulty recognizing the equality of women in every respect.

Yes! God calls us to work diligently for democracy — but an informed and deeply Christian democracy.

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For reflection and discussion

- *Even in our congregation some are powerless. Who are they? How would their empowerment change us*
- *In what unexpected way is God trying to lead us? What hinders us from hearing God?*

GROWING TOGETHER is a series of five monthly Sunday bulletin inserts for the ecumenical education of Christ’s faithful.



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