

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**

**The 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, August 23, 2020**

**Romans 12:1-8**

**“The Story of And” by Rev. Sue Trigger**

**Romans 12:1-8** So, brothers and sisters, because of God’s mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. <sup>2</sup> Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you. <sup>4</sup> We have many parts in one body, but the parts don’t all have the same function. <sup>5</sup> In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts that are consistent with God’s grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. <sup>7</sup> If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. <sup>8</sup> If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging. The one giving should do it with no strings attached. The leader should lead with passion. The one showing mercy should be cheerful.

**Show “The Story of And” video** (video located here: <https://gcpc.org/worship/online-worship/august-23-2020.html>)

The day we moved from Iowa to Arkansas there was snow on the ground in Iowa. When we arrived in Arkansas it was a lovely 55 degrees. Mitch and I gladly took off our winter coats! As we drove through town, we were a bit surprised to see people wrapped in parkas bracing against the cold as they walked down the street. It became clear that we would need to adapt to some cultural changes.

I was hired as the Director of Christian Education at a Presbyterian church. They hosted a lovely reception to welcome me. One of the members came over to meet me. He was friendly enough and asked if I wanted to hear a joke. “Sure,” I said, “I love a good joke.” He asked, “What’s the difference between a Yankee and a Damned Yankee?” I had no idea. “A Yankee is someone who comes to visit and goes back home. A damned Yankee comes to visit and decides to stay.” Oh! I guess that made me a damned yankee.

Over the years, Mitch and I have lived in Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Arkansas, Kentucky, Indiana, New York, New Jersey, and now Kansas. We have definitely experienced some cultural diversity. When we moved to Binghamton, NY we quickly learned that outsiders are easy to spot because they didn’t correctly say “elementary” school or “Beethoven St. or Goethe St.”. (The streets were Beethoven and Goethe.) One

time in New Jersey, a church elder asked if I would be able to participate in a coming event. I answered, “God willing and the creek don’t rise.” “What did you say?” she asked. “God willing and the creek don’t rise.” “That must be a Midwestern thing.” She said. I’m not sure, but I think I picked that up in Arkansas.

What I have learned from our years of moving around is that people take their cultural identity seriously. So much so that it becomes a dividing line for some. You’re not like me, so you’re not welcome here. I say soda and you say pop. It took me forever to learn to say soda, now I don’t know what to say. “You’re wrong and I’m right.” That’s the message behind pointing out our differences. We imagine that these regional differences are so severe that we can’t possibly understand each other.

Once again, I have chosen a book by Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso for this month’s Storybook Sunday. “The Story of And” introduces us to some very opinionated geometric shapes. Because of their differences, they insult each other and end up hurting each other’s feelings. “You don’t even have a neck!” “You’re a silly almost trapezoid.” “You have a useless side.” “You’re such an egg head.” The book uses geometric shapes, but the pattern of behavior is the same as those who insult others because of where they came from, their race, gender, creed, age and so on. One of our most divisive human behaviors is stereotyping. We create exaggerated images and ideas about people we perceive as different. People often distort the truth about a person or group in order to allow little or no individual differences. Thinking geometrically, we believe that there is no place for a square peg in our round hole.

It only takes a little time reading to Bible to learn that this problem has been going on for thousands of years. Stereotyping even happened to Jesus. When he began to invite disciples to follow him, Philip went to find his friend Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth.” Nathanael responded, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”

Stereotyping is a good example of a pattern of the world that Paul was referring to in our scripture reading when he said, “Don’t be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God’s will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.” Humans like to categorize people and things into neat little groups. These categories make it easier for us to process information. When a person fits into a category, we don’t have to get to know them, we assume that we already know them. If you’re a Southerner you speak with a slow dialect, and eat cheese grits. If you’re a Midwesterner

you speak perfect English – no dialect – are well educated and know a lot about agriculture. If you’re a Northeasterner you have a dialect that sounds like a mafia boss, you’re always in a hurry and wear the latest fashion. If you’re from the west, you spend a lot of time in the sun, ride a horse and wear cowboy boots. You may have heard some bias in those stereotypes. Our stereotypes are satisfying to us, they help us predict someone’s behavior and that helps us feel comfortable, even superior. When we categorize people, then we determine if they are part of the in group or the out group, whether we can trust them or need to be suspicious of them. The whole point is to make us feel better about ourselves. Our “in groups” are people whose stereotype is like ours.<sup>1</sup> My peeps, my groupies, my tribe.

The Story of And reminds us that when we categorize others, there will be parts missing. Sasso wrote, “To create a world without a missing piece, all the different shapes make us complete. I am I and you are you. This is really nothing new. But remember it’s a fact, we are stronger back to back to back.” In today’s scripture lesson, Paul said it this way, “I can say to each one of you: don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you.”<sup>4</sup> We have many parts in one body, but the parts don’t all have the same function.<sup>5</sup> In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other.” We belong to each other, we need each other with all of our differences.

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned as we have moved around the country, is that stereotypes are not what’s important. Most of time stereotypes are not accurate, and they get in the way of see what is important. Our categories of who’s in and who’s out create division and over inflated egos. Romans 12: 3 speaks to this, “Because of the grace that God gave me,” Paul wrote, “I can say to each one of you: don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you.” There is no doubt that there are some regional differences in our country, but how a person speaks, what they wear, how quickly they move, and even their favorite athletic team is not what matters about a person. What matters is that they are a child of God. Each human being needs to know that they are loved and welcome wherever they are. What matters is that God has blessed each person with gifts and talents that when joined with my gifts and talents can change lives for the good.

I love the way Rabbi Sasso helps us see that the important thing is not to find common ground, but to see that when we team up – with all of our differences – we can create something new, and that is what the work of God is all about isn’t it? Creating something new. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah saying, “Look!

I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?" Triangle and Rectangle, Line, Square and all the shapes in "The Story of And" remind us that when we are focused on our differences, we can't see the possibilities for something new that are waiting for us – if we join together.

"We have different gifts that are consistent with God's grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith.<sup>7</sup> If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching.<sup>8</sup> If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging. The one giving should do it with no strings attached. The leader should lead with passion. The one showing mercy should be cheerful." And when we join together, we are God's community.

Imagine with me that the word and is much more than a little word, it is the spirit of God that takes our individual differences and joins us together to do great things. With that in mind, listen to the end of the book one more time. "When we meet someone different from us, and we are tempted to make a fuss. Look for our friend, the small word *and*, so simple and sure, saying, 'Yes, we can.' She joins our hands and shows us how to trust, then you and I become us. What wonders there can be, when you and I are we...family."<sup>ii</sup> Imagine what can be, with God, and with you, and with me, joined together by the small word *and*. May it be so.

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<sup>i</sup> Why and How Stereotypes are Formed, <https://msu.edu/course/psy/442/stereotypes.ppt/sld003.htm>

<sup>ii</sup> Eisenberg Sasso, Sandy, "The Story of And", Flyaway Books, 100 Witherspoon, Louisville, KY. 2019.  
[www.flyawaybooks.com](http://www.flyawaybooks.com)