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Syd Hielema

Dordt College

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Every Tribe, Language, People, and Nation



by Sydney Hielema

When I was a child at Calvin Christian School in St. Catharines, Ontario, our Christian Reformed teacher told us this story one day. An elderly Baptist gentleman had passed away and was being welcomed at the pearly gates by a small gathering of saints. They offered to give him a guided tour of the celestial city, and soon they were underway. On the tour, he excitedly heard and saw descriptions beyond the imagination. At one point they turned a corner, and there was a huge, walled-off complex, looking like an enormous stadium/con-

Dr. Sydney Hielema is Associate Professor of Theology at Dordt College. He will be leaving to accept a position at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, fall 2006.

vention center-type area with no doors or windows or any kind of visible entrance and signs urging people to be quiet. "What's that?" he asked his hosts. "Oh," they replied in a whisper, "that's where the Christian Reformed people are. They think they're the only ones here."

Since then I've heard the same story told by members of other denominations, with their own denomination used in the punch line. Every time I hear the story, people chuckle, and everyone understands why the story needs to be told. We know that in eternity, believers of many different stripes and colors will be gathered together in the presence of our Lord, but we all seem to have a hard time living towards that reality now. Why is that? Does it really matter?

I suspect that I was asked to present on this theme because it does matter. To a certain extent Christian schools have been protected subculture enclaves, places where those from Dutch Reformed ethnic backgrounds feel very much at home and those from non-Dutch Reformed ethnic backgrounds must struggle to find their place, some more and others less. But two things are happening: first, the Dutch Reformed identity of our schools is weakening year by year, and it's not clear what is taking its place. Second, the world is shrinking year by year, and we interact with more and more people who are not like us. The times in which we live force us to deal with this issue.

I will walk through this topic by addressing three questions. First, why is it so hard for us to live towards that eternal picture of eternity where in all tribes and languages and peoples and nations rejoice together before the throne of the Lamb?

Second, how do we see this problem addressed in Scripture? And finally, what concrete, practical steps might we take right now to fit inside the biblical patterns?

First, why is it so hard for us to embrace diversity? It is certainly hard for me. I was born into a Christian Reformed family more than half a century ago. I have belonged to that denomination my entire life and have been a student and a teacher in schools connected to the CRC for almost my entire life. I feel more at home speaking to Christian school teachers in Lynden, Washington, or worshipping in a CRC church in Kemptonville, Nova Scotia, than I do drinking a cup of coffee with a Christian Hispanic family in my own neighborhood.

I believe it is hard to overcome these tendencies because the principal dynamics of both the big-picture cultural context and the dynamics of the Reformed subculture reinforce these tendencies. In other words, both the main forces that drive all of life in North America and the forces that shape the character of the Reformed subculture of which our schools are a part encourage us to favor our own people – the “insiders” – and make it hard for the others – the “outsiders” – to be welcomed among us.

There is a common perception that we live in an extremely tolerant age – we choose our sexual identity; we mix and match religious beliefs in any way that we want; nobody else can tell us how to live our life; we all must simply accept everyone’s choices about almost every part of life.

That tolerance was true to a great extent until 9/11, and that nearly religious belief in tolerance remains powerful, especially in large urban areas and in large areas of popular culture. However, tolerance is no longer the dominant spirit of our age. The birth of this change can be traced to a very specific event: the appearance of “freedom fries” during the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq. Maybe you remember their arrival: the government of France disputed some of the reasons our government was articulating for starting a war against Iraq, and in an angry response to this French disputation, common products in our culture that used the term “french” in their name were replaced with the word “freedom.”

There was something deeply ironic about this

development: in the US we hold freedom of speech to be one of our most cherished possessions; going back to 1776, no other nation on earth has more consistently been at our side during conflicts than France, and yet when France exercised its right to practice freedom of speech and questioned our plans, we demonized them and tried to replace any cultural references to that nation’s name with the word “freedom.” In other words, we used the word “freedom” to deny freedom of speech to a long-term friend. The 2004 elections are commonly regarded as one of the most polarized campaigns that we have ever witnessed, and one might say that this election campaign brought to full flower the rise of an intolerant spirit that was first seen in freedom fries.

The post 9/11 dying of tolerance is reinforced by the internet and cable TV. When news anchor Peter Jennings died this summer, we heard a great deal about the decline of mainstream news watching. Whereas once the big three – NBC, CBS and ABC – together were the main sources of information concerning what was going on in America and the world, we now have a proliferation of cable news stations and internet sites that freely weave together news and opinion so that each of us can find news-reporting that fits with our own assumptions, prejudices, and worldview. Because news-reporting has a great effect upon how we understand the world, such news-reporting reinforces an intolerant spirit that divides people into fragmented communities. In summary, both a negative type of tolerance and a negative type of intolerance powerfully influence our culture at present, but (a) the intolerance is on the rise at the moment, and (b) Reformed Christians are influenced much more by this rising intolerant spirit than by the tolerant spirits of our age.

These dynamics at work in the big culture are matched with a different set of dynamics at work in the Reformed subculture. First, Christianity by its very nature must always deal with an uneasy tension between being a holy people who are set apart and being light and yeast in the world as we follow the great commission to go into all the world and disciple all nations. We can find that tension in every book of the Bible, and we capture it with a lovely phrase: we are in the world but not of the

world. However, that phrase is much easier to say than to live. Christians will find it difficult to both embrace the stranger and stay rooted in their own unique Christian identity, though Christians are called to do both.

Second, it is tough being a Reformed Christian these days. Our polarized culture sees Christians in terms of right-wing conservatives and left-wing liberals, and Reformed Christians are not comfortable in either of those places. On the right, we have public spokesmen like Pat Robertson, who advises our government to assassinate the president of Venezuela, and we also have the Left Behind books, which are loved by tens of millions of Christians even though their theological understandings and biblical interpretation are extremely questionable. On the left, we find believers celebrating the ordination of practicing homosexuals and others

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proclaiming that Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed all provide equally valid paths to God. Reformed Christians do not fit on either side, though some feel more comfortable leaning to the right than to the left. However, we lean either way uneasily, and that uneasiness makes it confusing to know where we belong. Further, in that confusion we may tend to hang on to our Reformed identity for dear life in ways that do not invite others to partner with us.

Third, running Christian schools and teaching in them is hard work! We face all kinds of pres-

ures: we don't always have the resource structures that other schools might have, and tuition-paying parents can be more demanding as their expectations follow their tuition payments into our schools. When human beings are under pressure, we tend to "circle our wagons" for survival, and this wagon-circling also can subtly cause our schools to become isolated Reformed enclaves rather than places that welcome others.

In summary, as we are on the way to the new creation, a place overflowing with God-praising diversity, we are called to begin embodying that diversity now, even though we live in a world that discourages us from moving in that direction. Still, embodying that diversity scares us: we are influenced by the rise of intolerance in our own culture; we're not quite sure what it means to be Reformed; we do not want to lose our Reformed heritage; and we're just plain uncomfortable stretching ourselves beyond our Reformed ghettos. We live in anxious times globally, nationally, and locally, and anxiety is constricting: it makes us want to cling to what is familiar and also cling to who is familiar.

A lot more could be said about the problem, but discussing our fear of diversity is not our main goal here. Instead, we will go to the Bible, specifically to the re-conversion of Peter in Acts 10-15, for direction. In this section of Acts, the apostle Peter is ministering in the town of Joppa, and ministry is hard work. Since he is ministering in a Mediterranean culture, he is taking an afternoon nap. During this nap he sees a vision wherein a voice from heaven tells him three times to eat unclean animals. As a good and devout Jew, he refuses. Then the Spirit tells him to go with three men who will come looking for him. Peter and several of his friends accompany these three men to Caesarea to the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Peter now realizes why he was given this vision: he explains the gospel to Cornelius and his household. Poor Peter could not even finish his sermon: while he was still speaking, the Holy Spirit overcame Cornelius and his household, and Peter, recognizing that this was a God thing, realized that it was time to shut up, let the sermon go, and baptize these people as fellow Christians. Sometimes we call this story "the con-

version of Cornelius,” but that title is not accurate. Cornelius is already converted before the story begins, and Peter simply is called upon to confirm and make official what God has already done.

Still, there is a very significant conversion here – the re-conversion of Peter and ultimately of the entire Christian church. When word gets out that Peter and his companions not only entered a Gentile home but actually ate there – which, in the ancient world, is an intense act of fellowship/*koinonia* – an angry church holds him to account. He is now unclean – unfit for ministry. When Peter explains the entire sequence of events in careful detail for the church in Jerusalem, the gathered body recognize that the Lord has profoundly stretched their understanding of what it means to be the people of God. They take a good while to sort this matter out – it leads to a very heavy synod meeting in Acts 15. Later still, it leads to a sharp dispute between Peter and Paul that is described in the book of Galatians. The Bible pays much more attention to how the Peter/Cornelius episode changes Peter than to how it changes Cornelius. Peter’s ongoing re-conversion is the real point of the story.

That re-conversion of Peter is very instructive for us. Part of walking with Jesus is that he is never done with us. Every day is a day of re-conversion—of being stretched, of being challenged, of recognizing that the Lord is infinitely bigger than we had realized. Every day we have to recalibrate our understandings to do justice to his greatness. This recalibration comes in two dimensions: first, God is always bigger than we had thought. Paul, praying for God’s people in Ephesians, says, “I pray that you may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge.” God’s love is always wider and longer and higher and deeper than we had imagined, and the only way that we can begin to grasp it is by seeking to do so together with ALL the saints, not just the saints that are affiliated with us.

Second, the power and scope of the new creation—the coming of the Kingdom, the goal of God’s redeeming work—is always greater than we can imagine. The visions that we are given in the book of Revelation and by several Old Testament

prophets are overwhelming. In Revelation 7 we read, “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.”

One theologian has written that our greatest calling is to live as fossils of the future. Fossils show evidence of life that existed many, many years ago. To live as a fossil of the future is to embody evidence that the beginnings of an astounding new life are present now, that seeds have been planted that will someday bloom completely. As that is the case, the eternal community of every nation, tribe, people and language is present among us now as a fossil, growing from humble beginnings to eternal fullness.

What do such fossils look like, and what steps can we take to grow towards being such fossils? The first step may sound very strange, but it is the only first step that makes sense. If one is a Reformed Christian, and if the school where one teaches is based on Reformed principles, one can celebrate one’s Reformed identity in an ecumenical way: *One can be generously Reformed*. What does it mean to be generously Reformed? I was Reformed at first because I was born into a Reformed home and community. I have carefully examined many different Christian traditions, and I have remained Reformed because I have become convinced that in spite of some significant weaknesses, the Reformed way of understanding the Bible allows us to work with the biggest picture of biblical truth that I have encountered. Loving a God who is both creator and redeemer, understanding two very different testaments that are part of one continuous story of grace, seeing how all of creation and all of Scripture are held together in Jesus Christ, and recognizing that every part of my life and this world is called to surrender to the transforming lordship of Jesus Christ are articulated in the Reformed tradition more consistently and coherently than anywhere else that I have discovered. My parents and home community raised me as a Reformed believer; and the Bible compels me to grow more deeply from those Reformed roots.

The Bible also compels me to be critical of my Reformed roots; therefore it compels me to be generously Reformed. I am called to grasp the love

of Christ together with all the saints, and there have been some non-Reformed saints who have instructed me in marvelous ways. At a critical and confusing point in my adult life, a Roman Catholic priest taught me how to pray inside the Holy Spirit's leading, something I did not learn in the Reformed community. Pentecostal neighbors with whom we formed a Bible study taught me more varied ways to worship. The Anglican graduate school where I studied helped me to see God's hand more clearly throughout the history of the Christian faith. I'm still waiting for a brother or sister in the Lord to teach me how to live as an evangelist in better ways than my Reformed roots taught me. I could continue, but each of these non-Reformed influences helped me to become a deeper, more-rooted-in-the-Word-and-Spirit Reformed Christian. In each of these encounters – with the Catholic priest, the Pentecostal neighbors, and the Anglican seminary – there were elements of their teaching to which I said, “no, I don't see how that fits with biblical teaching.” But discerning the places to say “no” freed me to celebrate the “yes” places, the places where their gifts could be received as gifts from the Lord.

What's true of us personally is also true of us institutionally. Just as I am called daily to grow by welcoming other believers as gifts from the Lord, so we as institutions are called to grow as well.

However, we know that life is usually more complicated than was just described. We have all met believers who seek to join our school communities but who encounter practices or beliefs with which they disagree, and we end up having “all or nothing” conversations with them. In other words, their message to us is, “this is what the Bible says, this is why you are wrong, and there's no room here for a no and a yes; it's all or nothing.” I believe that I am called to receive everyone that I meet as a potential gift from God who may be the Lord's instrument for my ongoing re-conversion, as Cornelius was the Lord's instrument for Peter's re-conversion. But such a conversation assumes that (a) both parties have good gifts from the Lord to share and (b) both parties have more to learn through the Lord's work of re-conversion. When my conversation partner assumes that she or he has all the truth and I have very little or none, a

Spirit-guided conversation becomes almost impossible, and as Paul says in Romans 12, “if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” In such a case, peace is not possible though I have done all that I could to seek peace. The impossibility of further agreement is okay: I am called to be generously Reformed, not to sell out my identity.

Second, I am called to create hospitable space. As teachers and administrators, we are always serving as hosts. To host is to make room for another to be at home; or, as the writers to the Hebrews puts it, “do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.” How do our schools look when they become hospitable places?

What's true of us personally is also true of us institutionally. Just as I am called daily to grow by welcoming other believers as gifts from the Lord, so we as institutions are called to grow as well.

First, it is not we as teachers and administrators who are serving as hosts; rather, it is our schools that are serving as hosts. Therefore, inherent in Christian education is the process of teaching our students how Christian hospitality looks. Our classrooms are both places that are hospitable and places where hospitality is learned. Our students must come to understand how generous Reformedness looks. They need to see that every new person they meet might be an angel whom they are called to entertain; the new person may come bearing gifts that will stretch them so that they can grow as children of God.

A few years ago my freshmen students were writing their final exam in December. A delight-

ful young Sioux City woman who was a Roman Catholic handed in her exam, and as she did, I thanked her for her hard work that term and said that I hoped to have her in class again some day. She smiled, sadly shook her head, and replied, “I’m not coming back to Dordt after Christmas. My roommate told me that I’m going to hell if I stay with the Catholic church, and, well, I find it hard to grow here as a Christian if that’s how people look at me.”

I could have cried right then and there. I don’t know who her roommate was, but I do know that many young adults have never been taught how to entertain strangers, have never been taught how to be re-converted through Cornelius, have never learned the principle that every one potentially carries gifts from God to receive with joy and thanksgiving.

How do you talk about those who are different from you in your classrooms and schools? Do you find yourself focusing on what they do wrong and what we do right, or are you able to rise above that anxious temptation and point out both our own strengths and weaknesses and the strengths and weaknesses of others? And when you share your own faith stories with your students, are you able to share with them how Christians who are different from your background have helped you grow in Christ too? In what ways is your classroom a place where students learn how hospitality looks, since you are modeling it for them and teaching it to them? Gracious hospitality is not a skill that comes naturally; it needs to be very intentionally modeled and taught. In general, the tolerant spirits of our age tend to have more sway in urban areas, and the intolerant spirits of our age tend to have more sway in small towns and rural areas. Many of our schools serve the latter kind of community, which calls us to challenge our communities to learn how to practice hospitality.

Second, providing hospitable space works from a faith that is *free to be very patient*. Inherent in welcoming strangers in the name of the Lord is finding the places to say “yes, thank you for the gifts you bring” and the places to say “no thank you; in that area let’s agree to disagree in a friendly way.” As teachers, we very naturally believe that we have good things to offer to our students—we have to

believe that we do if we are teachers. Further, we desire them to receive our good things right now. Very often, however, the strangers that we welcome are not able to receive our good gifts right away, and then we are called to be very patient with them, to continue welcoming them in faith that some day they may be able to receive our gifts.

Two stories will help me illustrate this point. Two women who were co-workers in a large office building in New York City became good friends. One was a Christian; the other was an atheist who was very committed to abortion rights. They ate lunch together almost every day, when they talked about everything, including their beliefs. Eventually the atheist said to her friend, “tell me more about Jesus; I think I need to give my life over to him.” And she did. A week or so later she said, “you know I’ve actively worked for abortion rights my whole life, and that’s such a deep part of who I am, I’m going to continue doing that as I learn more about Jesus.” Her Christian friend simply nodded to indicate that she’d heard what she said, but she did not say a word.

Two years later—two years!—the new Christian said to her friend over lunch one day, “following Jesus and abortion just don’t make sense together, do they? I think I’ve been going down the wrong road concerning abortion.”

A second story focuses on my teaching at Dordt College. Much of my teaching at Dordt involves working with our freshmen students to teach them a Reformed worldview. About seven years ago, I had a student who came from a small and somewhat wild Pentecostal church in California. He had been abandoned by his father at a very young age and raised by his alcoholic mother. At the age of six, he became the parent figure for his younger siblings, and his church became his lifeline, his source of survival.

The Reformed worldview that I was teaching contradicted almost all of the fundamental points he had learned in his Pentecostal church, and about four weeks in the term, I could tell that when he entered my classroom, he completely shut down. He was incapable of even asking the question, “do the things that Hielema teaches make biblical sense?” Just asking that question would undermine the foundation on which his lifeline

was built. I decided that I would not challenge him to deal with what I was teaching but that, instead, I would cultivate as supportive a personal relationship with him as I could. After all, he would have seven more semesters of a Dordt education after he left my class, and maybe farther down the line he would be ready to consider the Reformed worldview if I didn't destroy his future openness by be-

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ing too aggressive now. One of the wonderful emphases of the Reformed tradition is that God is sovereign, and because God is sovereign, I am free to be very patient and let Him do his work when the time is best. That patience allows me to be a gracious host.

As a teacher I create hospitable space by serving as a patient host and by modeling and teaching my students so that we may together serve as hosts. That kind of teaching leads to a third point. Hosting well requires learning *the skills* involved with hosting and *taking the risks* necessary to learn these skills well. As a father, I've really enjoyed teaching our children the normal set of skills involved in growing up – walking, riding a bike, ice skating and playing hockey (the most important ones), driving a car, and all the rest. Our youngest was born with deformed arms and hands, so learning the basic skills was harder for him than it is for most of us. Teaching him to ice skate was terrifying because he couldn't really use his arms to catch himself when he fell, but accepting the inevitability of falling is essential because it frees one to take the

risks necessary to learn greater stability and greater speed. At a very early age he chose a theme verse for his life, Deut. 31:6, some of Moses' farewell words to Israel: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of opposition, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." He practices that verse by looking challenges in the eye and then repeating them over and over and over again until the challenge becomes comfortable for him.

My son has been a mentor for me because when it comes to welcoming the stranger, I was born handicapped. I need to practice skills that will lead to my falling flat on my face, but frankly, I would rather not practice them at all than try to practice them and fall. I am afraid, and I need to be strong and courageous and remember that I am not alone but that I am ice-skating with the Lord. I need to remember that the only way to learn the skills necessary for hosting is to do them over and over and over again until they become a little bit comfortable and natural for me.

It seems to me that four skills are essential for hosting the stranger well. First, we must be able to listen and observe ourselves and our community from the stranger's perspective. Especially, we must note words that we say and body language that we use to communicate those words that unintentionally are given like slamming a door in that person's face. Recently a mother told me that her eight-year-old adopted daughter—adopted at the age of five from Eastern Europe—came home from school and said that her class had talked about how parents teach certain skills to their three-year-old children; she said that the class had then all been assigned to come back with stories from their three-year-old days. This mother sighed and said, "the teacher knows that we adopted her at five. Couldn't he have found some way to revise the assignment so that my daughter wouldn't ask me questions that will only break her heart?"

I have sympathy for the mother, the daughter, and the teacher. This hosting skill requires the teacher to make adjustments on the basis of one person because an activity will alienate that person in some way. We teachers are under enough pressure already. How can we pay such attention to little details? We can begin. We will fall flat

on our faces, but there are times when we adjust something for the sake of one person; we have all done it, and we do it because God does it too. The Christian faith, from Genesis to Revelation, is NOT a faith that forces everyone into the mold of the majority; rather, it is a faith in which special attention is paid to the weak ones, the hurting ones, the different ones. In public, Jesus took on a whole tribe of Pharisees for the sake of one woman who was caught in the act of adultery; she was worth it, and so is every one who enters our doors, especially those who are not part of the comfortable majority.

Second, we need to learn and practice the skill of noticing. When I started teaching at the age of 22, I had grown up in a wonderfully loving Christian home with a mom and a dad, and I just assumed that my students were made in my image—Christian Reformed teenagers with loving moms and dads. Soon enough (a) we learn that we have significant numbers of students for whom that is not the case, and (b) we come to surmise that there are also significant numbers of students that are living in homes where there is great distress but where no one knows about it. I remember as a young teacher when it suddenly hit me how much I needed to notice while I was teaching. My immediate response was, “this is too much; I can’t handle this; I’m in the wrong profession; it’s time to go back to landscaping.” Learning to teach this way is a little bit like allowing our eyes to adjust when we leave a well-lit room for a dark room. At first we see nothing, then shapes gradually take form, and eventually we can pick out even some smaller things in the dark, but we never see everything. When I am set free from the need to see everything, I can relax and learn to pay attention, to notice the things that are there to notice. Teachers are noticers, and noticing makes me free to receive people as they are and then welcome them accordingly.

A third skill is a strange one: we must learn to disconnect our anxiety from our actions. Those verses in the Bible about not being “anxious about anything” drive me crazy sometime, as if I can just say to myself, “Oh right, I forgot. Go away, anxiety. I don’t need you today.” That line has never worked for me, though some people claim it works

for them. However, the Bible often talks about emotions more in terms of actions than in terms of feelings. I believe that Scripture is teaching us to disconnect our feelings of anxiety from our actions. I imagine myself as a car that has two different engines: the Holy Spirit engine—the new self that Paul talks about—and the sin engine—the old self. Both engines are trying to drive the car. The Christian life is all about keeping the gearshift of the sin engine in neutral while the gearshift of the Holy Spirit engine is engaged in Drive.

Welcoming the stranger gets my anxiety engine—which is part of the sin-drive shaft—all revved up. It doesn’t matter how revved up that engine is if the gearshift is in neutral. I’ve learned that keeping the gearshift in neutral takes practice, and it also means failure some time. Success take prayer, self-control, patience, and the freedom to fail.

Finally, we need to learn to rise above perceiving reality in terms of polar opposites. Our brains are trained to analyze reality in terms of two opposites: Christians and non-Christians, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, Reformed Christians and non-Reformed Christians, white folks and colored folks, Americans and non-Americans, good people and bad people, cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, angels and demons, straight people and gay people, creationists and evolutionists, people for women in office and people against it, and we could go on and on. We are trained to see the world in terms of us against them.

There is a place for drawing a line in the sand between us and them, but that line is not at the foundation of the Christian life, because ultimately constructing the foundation of the Christian life is a task reserved for the sovereign God and not for us. I like to tell my students that there are ultimately two right ways of looking at humanity: (1) we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God, and we all share that fallen-ness together, and (2) perhaps the only dividing line we may draw as we look at people is the line between believers and those who are not yet believers, because we do not have the long-term knowledge to go any farther in making distinctions. If I look at all humankind through those two glasses, I think I am able

to welcome strangers unawares and make room for the Corneliuses of the world to contribute to my ongoing conversion in Christ.

We are pilgrims on the way to that great nation of diversity. We are not called to arrive, but we are called to press on. We are not called to be perfect, but we are called to take risks and be uncomfortable. When Marva Dawn writes that one of the marks of true Christian community is that we are in fellowship with people we don't like to be with, I think she's probably right. Jesus himself said, "If

you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your father in heaven." He's the true son, and that's how he lived every day. As we fix our eyes on him to run the race set before us, his spirit equips us to begin to live that way too.