I witnessed a miraculous event in recent days. Unbelievable really. The oddest thing happened. But by various chain of providence, this sweet soul by the name of Francis was invited to speak to a joint session of Congress.

He is an outsider by a good many measures; and they are arguably the most powerful assemblage on earth.

He, dressed in the ecclesiastical garb of the Vatican; and they in their business best.

He, slow and articulate in a language not his own; and they, accustomed to not fully hearing what gets said in those chambers, understanding every word he spoke.

And here’s the strangest miracle in the whole thing. It’s part of the truth in me. I, who have never been accepting of the whole notion of the papacy or the wrappings and trappings of the patriarchy and hierarchy that comes with it, found myself strangely warmed. This gentle old man, the one who is revered by 1.2 billion people around the planet as the Vicar of Christ got through to me. I heard him. He touched my soul with his kind and compassionate spirit, with his prophetic truth telling such that I felt a twinge of sadness as I watched his airplane lift to the sky and head for home.

Sometimes autobiography helps. And maybe this is part of the power of the Francis Factor that I experienced.

I have long-felt the silence and the pain of a rift in my own family. My mother grew up in the Roman Catholic Church and my father’s roots were Protestant. My mother, an Irish Catholic from Queen; and my father, the son of a Scottish preacher. O my goodness! Sounds benign in these times today, but it was no small happenstance when they fell in love. Back in the day no one crossed those kinds of boundaries – or at least no one did without significant pain.

We never talked about it when I was growing up, this matter of religious diversity, but I always felt the tension. My mother became Protestant probably in no small part because my father was leaning toward being a pastor himself. But she was destined to change even had they not married. But then add years and families and a gaggle of cousins; holidays and birthdays and such. Mind you: we all loved each other, still do. It’s just that there was this thing, this difference, this invisible space for which we had no common language or comfort. Oddly, over time my dad became something of the family elder, a chaplain of sorts across the family visits.

So maybe, just maybe, this is why I was so apprehended by the gentle 78 year-old Pontiff who somehow stood it that space in between. And not just in between Protestants and Catholics; but right smack dab in the gaps that separate so many people: race, ethnicity, gender, age, wealth, poverty, sexual-orientation, class . . . you know how long the list really is.
But here is the truth that sets us free. All of us. Everyone of us. If we can find our way to listen and to hear. “The deepest longing of every human heart, the secret surge of hope in our tattered and tangled history, is this dream that all of our alienation and estrangement can be healed, and that we can become one.”

I believe that about you and I know it about me. Separation of all sorts and sizes wears us out of our better selves. And the walls that divide tear not only at the fabric of what the world can be, but must surely break the heart of God.

I was fascinated to read this. “Walls, visible or not, don’t just divide us. They make us ill. After the Berlin Wall went up, East German psychiatrists observed that the Berlin Wall caused significant increases in mental illness, rage, and addiction. It was measurable, verifiable and predictable. It was called wall disease. The closer to the physical wall people lived, the more acute their disorders. The only imaginable cure was to tear it down. And sure enough: in 1990 psychiatrists noted a reversal when the wall came down, something that was clinically referred to as emotional liberation.”

Again: “The deepest longing of every human heart is that our alienation can be healed and we can become one.”

Years ago an early Christian writer by the name of Paul took it one giant step deeper. He observed all sorts of division and hostility that was forming in the early church – can you even imagine that? In the church no less!

And so he wrote with urgency to the gathered believers at Ephesus. In the old language, Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, circumcised and uncircumcised, baptized by Paul or baptized by another had begun to put up walls. They drew distinctions and created tensions as they staked their own claims. And, by the way, all certain that they had it right! Who’s in, who’s out – just as it still goes on today.

So Paul found it essential to remind them that common ground needed to prevail, and that the common ground among them was Jesus; that he is the one who can break down the walls that divide one people from another; and in him we have the possibility of coming together in harmony and in fullness and in peace. There is no better day than World Communion Sunday to take this to heart. Fully. Here. Now. May we stand on this common ground as we make our many ways. May the bread and cup remind us again, and deeply, of our common heritage as children of the Living God. May we be nourished to see and embrace the presence of God in all others.

My family and my friends, come now, the reconciliation of the table awaits. Amen.

© 2015 Charles Geordie Campbell.