

ELUSIVE UNITY

7 Easter – Year C – Grace Church, May 23, 2004

Reverend Dr. Patrick R. Close

Prayer: *“Lord Jesus, help us to praise you as we ought: to sing together rather than to struggle against each other, to join hands in unity rather than to build walls between one another, to wonder at your great glory, your great love for us, and your great vision for us. This day and always, in your name we pray. Amen.”* (From Pulpit Resource, May, 2004)

There is a story about a small town that lied in infamous “tornado alley” in the Midwest. One day a tremendous storm struck the community in the late spring. There were multiple tornados coupled with lightning, torrential downpours and rampant destruction. The town was virtually destroyed. No one of the local churches was left remaining the Saturday the storm rolled through the place.

Early Sunday morning, the people quietly and slowly gathered in the center of their destroyed community. Someone softly began to sing an old familiar hymn. Soon others began to join in. Groups of people joined hands. The name, Jesus could be heard as prayers spontaneously arose. Most of the voices joined together in the Lord’s Prayer. Someone read from their tattered and rain soaked Bible.

Someone moved a table into the midst of the gathering. A tablecloth appeared on it. Another person came forward with a jug of wine while another broke a loaf of bread from the grocery store that laid in rubble. A priest quietly stepped up and spoke the words of consecration. The bread was blessed, thanks given, the bread broken and given to the people. The cup was filled and shared around. No one was left out. There was more singing, more prayers, more embracing and holding of hands, huge smiles ... and the presence of the Lord moved throughout the group bringing a sense of love, of peace and of hope.

No one asked each other where they stood on recent issues. Doctrine or dogma was not raised. No one asked to see letters of membership or baptism records. It didn’t matter what your gender, race, sexual orientation or economic class was. No one threatened to leave. No one was offended. No one asked for membership cards or whether their dues were paid up. No one said it had to be their way or else. There were no threats. All you saw or heard in this broken and devastated town was Jesus, people, the Word of God and the sacraments.

Makes you kind of think, doesn’t it?

Frederick Beuchner, a Presbyterian theologian writer, wrote in his 1991 book, “The Clown in the Belfry”: “Maybe the best thing that could happen to the Church would be for some great tidal wave to wash it all away. The church buildings tumbling down, the church money all lost, the bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves. The differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Jesus Christ ... which was all there was in the first place.”

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Karl Barth, the great German Protestant theologian wrote in 1956 his systematic theology called “Church Dogmatics.” He said, “There is not theological, spiritual or BIBLICAL (emphasis mine) justification for the plurality of churches separated and mutually excluding one another internally, and therefore externally. Every division is a deep riddle, a scandal. The disunity of the Church is a scandal. In some cases the scandal is not serious, but just foolish.”

Makes you kind of think, doesn't it?

Reggie Fuller, my New Testament professor from seminary, comments on the Gospel of John today. He says: “Unity is not based on human efforts (or interpretations) but is the sharing of the word of God (about Jesus Christ) and the sacraments (with everyone).” What is our common ground? Reggie continues, “Jesus Christ is our unity and our foundation. Our mission is to make Jesus Christ known to EVERYONE (emphasis mine).” We are to share him with EVERYONE!

Makes you kind of think, doesn't it?

The Gospel talks today about Christian unity. Unity is not uniformity. Where do we see unity? Unity is not about what we want, but about what God wants. Too many times others dictate to us what they want and assume they are the ones professing the call for unity. They are wrong.

We live today with something I call the tragedy of negativity. It's made up of constant negatives, such as, “You can't” or “I won't.” We have seen too much of it in our own common life. It comes from lay and clergy voices who say: “You can't do that. I won't be part of you. I won't have them here. You can't participate here. I won't let you go to that. You can't be my bishop, my fellow priest or lay person, my Diocese.” In the end it all is summed up, “I don't want you.”

Makes you kind of think, doesn't it?

No where does Jesus say “I don't want you” or “You can't come near God.” John says to us that Jesus is the center of our unity. It's our mission to make him known. It means we have to find the common ground. It means that we have to suspend our judgments and prejudices and press forward for Jesus. It means we have to remove the obstacles that we erect that tell people they aren't welcomed. It means that unity has to take on new meaning and new urgency in our lives and churches.

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Now it's time to stop thinking and start acting.

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Prayer: *“O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions; take away all hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord; that, as there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, so we may be all of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity, and may with one mind and one mouth glorify you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”*