

Sermon for Sunday, Jan. 26, 2020
The Third Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A
Sermon Text(s): 1 Corinthians 1:10-18
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Last week was the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This annual observance began in the early 20th century in the Roman Catholic Church and is now an international ecumenical observance coordinated by the World Council of Churches.

It falls between January 18, the Feast of the Confession of St. Peter, and January 25, the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul, and reminds us of Jesus's prayer for the unity of his followers. In John chapter 17, the night before his death, Jesus prays that the disciples and those who will come after them **“may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them** even as you have loved me.” (John 17:21-23).

Jesus prayed that his followers would be “one” because he knew that divisions among us would jeopardize our credibility as witnesses to the Resurrection and spokespeople for the love of God.

That is, in fact, what has happened. Many people look at the sheer number of different branches of Christianity and throw their hands up in exasperation. “If these guys can’t even agree amongst themselves, why should I believe anything they’re trying to sell me?” they think.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an attempt to reverse that effect, to show that Christians can and do get along with one another and work together.

It doesn't seem like the framers of the lectionary got the memo that this is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, though, because instead of a nice passage from Acts about how the believers in the early church were “one in heart and mind,” we get this passage from 1 Corinthians about divisions in the church!

“It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters,” Paul writes to the church at Corinth. Not a shining example of Christian unity!

This passage does, however, remind us that Christian unity has never been easy, and has always required us to refocus our attention on the rightful object of our faith: Jesus himself.

The “quarrels” Paul addresses in the church at Corinth are a result of people dividing themselves into camps based on who baptized them.

He writes, “What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’, or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas’, or ‘I belong to Christ.’” (1 Corinthians 1:11-12).

Paul rebukes them for this. “Has Christ been divided?” he asks. “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13)

Later, in chapter 3 of the letter, he drives his point home:

“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

Paul’s critique is just as relevant to the church today as it was to the ancient Corinthians. I find it rather ironic that so many branches of Christianity take their names from the person whose theology started that movement. Lutherans, Wesleyans, Calvinists... by identifying ourselves in this way, we’re doing the very same thing the church at Corinth was doing and saying, “I belong to Luther” or “I belong to Wesley” or “I belong to Calvin” rather than “I belong to Christ!”

Case in point: we have defined ourselves so much by the leader who began our particular branch of the church, or with a particular kind of theological thinking, that we don’t even recognize each other as being part of the same religion anymore.

When I talk about interfaith dialogue in Christian contexts, inevitably someone will say, “Oh, yeah, we did some interfaith dialogue one time! We had a meeting with the Baptists!” or “We held a joint service with the Lutherans!”

But Episcopalians and Baptists talking to one another is not interfaith dialogue! Interfaith or interreligious dialogue is a conversation among people of different religions. Baptists and Lutherans and Methodists and Presbyterians and Pentecostals and Charismatics and Evangelicals, however different they are from one another, are all Christians! Their *denomination* may be Lutheran or Baptist or Methodist, but it's not their religion. Their *religion* is Christianity.

If someone asks you what religion you are, the correct response is not, "I'm Episcopalian." The correct response is, "I'm Christian!"

When we are baptized, we profess faith in Jesus Christ, not in the Episcopal Church or in the Presiding Bishop or the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Our baptismal service doesn't say anything about the Episcopal Church. You don't take a vow to obey your bishop or to follow the canon law of the Episcopal Church. The only vow you take at baptism is to follow Jesus Christ.

Even in our ordination services, we refuse to use denominational adjectives except where absolutely necessary. At the ordination of a priest or deacon, the bishop asks, "Will you be loyal to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of Christ as this Church has received them?" In the response, the person vows to "conform to the doctrine, discipline, and worship of The Episcopal Church," for the sake of clarity as to which rules and canons the person is bound to obey, but that is the only place in the entire service where the phrase "the Episcopal Church" is used.

All other references to the church are with the all-encompassing phrase "Church of God," emphasizing that the person is not being ordained just in the Episcopal Church, but in the universal Church, capital "C." We address bishops as "Bishop in the Church of God," not "Bishop in the Episcopal Church," and we ordain the person to be a deacon, priest, or bishop in "the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church," not in "the Episcopal Church."

We begin every baptismal service with the affirmation that there is "one Body and one Spirit, one hope in God's call to us, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all," echoing words from the letter to the Ephesians. Despite the visible disunity of the many denominations of

Christianity, each with their separate institutional structures of authority, in the liturgy, we still profess the unity of the church.

We do so because despite all our disagreements over how the church should be structured or governed or who should be allowed leadership within it, the thing that unites all Christians is a call and commitment to follow Jesus.

As the testimony of the early church shows, it's unlikely that we will ever be "of one mind" on all things, however much we may want to work toward that goal. There have always been disagreements and diversity of thought within the church, and human nature being what it is ensures that there will always continue to be.

But maybe the goal of Christian unity isn't that we all become members of the same church or govern ourselves the same way or worship in the same style. Maybe Christian unity doesn't mean we share similar political opinions, similar cultures, similar backgrounds, or even similar interpretations of scripture. Maybe "Christian unity" is as simple as the affirmations at the beginning of our baptismal service:

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?

Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?

Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?

Our unity as Christians comes in the form of our answer to those three questions. Those of us who answer "yes" to those questions (or "I do," as we say in our liturgy) are united with all others who answer those three questions the same way, regardless of whether we agree with them on anything else!

Ronald Rolheiser, a Roman Catholic theologian, describes the essential "unity" of the church in this way:

"To be in apostolic community, church, is not necessarily to be with others with whom we are emotionally, ideologically, and otherwise compatible. Rather it is to stand, shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, precisely with people who are very different from ourselves and, with them, hear a common word, say a common creed, share a common bread, and offer a

mutual forgiveness so as, in that way, to bridge our differences and become a common heart. Church is not about a few like-minded persons getting together for mutual support; it is about millions and millions of different kinds of persons transcending their differences so as to become a community beyond temperament, race, ideology, gender, language, and background."¹

Maybe “Christian unity” is as simple as remembering who we were baptized into. Were we baptized into Paul or Apollos? Were we baptized into Luther or Wesley or Calvin?

No, we were baptized into Christ. Paul and Apollos and Luther and Wesley and Calvin were all merely servants of God who led others to know Christ and to put their faith in him.

Our unity is not in an institution or an idea or a structure, but in a person.

If through our shared love of Jesus and commitment to follow in his way, we can form the kind of community that transcends differences, that amplifies our testimony in powerful ways.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?” Jesus asked (Luke 6:32). If you build community with those who look, act, and think like you, what credit is that to you? But when people who share no visible similarities or affinities with one another form bonds of friendship and affection, that speaks boldly to the power of God.

When we are able to share in worship, fellowship and ministry with Christians of other denominations, our witness is strengthened by the unity of our shared commitment to Christ. Because just as Paul wrote that there is no longer “Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female,” there is also no longer Episcopalian or Baptist, Pentecostal or Roman Catholic, Methodist or Mennonite, “for we are all one in Christ Jesus.” (cf. Galatians 3:28)

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999): 115.