

January 23, 2005
Psalm 133, I Corinthians 1:10-17
Dr. Lewis Galloway
“Unity without Uniformity”

A town was deeply divided over a zoning issue. The fight was about the redevelopment of a rundown neighborhood into an upscale commercial property. The struggle was not only about residential versus commercial development, but also about race and economic class. The neighborhood in question was a lower middle class, predominately Hispanic community. The ugly controversy spilled over into schools, clubs and businesses. At one gathering someone suggested that the churches could do something to bring peace to the community. From a corner of the room came a voice, “Who are you kidding? Christians can’t even get along with each other.”

How easily conflict within the church can undermine our witness in the larger community! If Christians cannot dwell together in peace, what does the church have to offer the world? With the variety of churches, traditions, denominations in this country, it is easy to forget that the church is one body. The differences exist not only among denominations, but also within denominations. The differences also exist within congregations. Over the last two centuries, the Presbyterian Church has struggled with the question of slavery, child labor, the interpretation of Scripture, war, nuclear weapons, the environment, the ordination of women and the ordination of gays and lesbians. Every time we face a new controversy, we wonder if this issue will split the church. Will it all end by our becoming “single issue” Christians who are unwilling to work, worship or have fellowship with anyone who disagrees on key (or should I say “pet”) issues? Conflict in the church has devastating consequences because it suggests that Christ has nothing to offer a divided world.

Division in the church is nothing new. The church in Corinth was composed of slaves and wealthy Roman citizens. There were people from different cultures and places such as Mesopotamia, Jerusalem, Crete and Asia. We would be shocked by some of their immoral behavior, business practices and sexual habits. The church was full of factions and divisions. There were “theological groupies” who claimed to follow Paul, Apollos, Peter or one of the other apostles. Greed, arrogance, lasciviousness and spiritual conceit seemed to be the order of the day. In the face of all these differences, Paul calls the Corinthian Christians to “be united in the same mind and the same purpose (1:10).” They are to repair the tear in the fabric of Christ’s body for Christ himself is not torn apart.

Christian unity is never a matter of everyone agreeing on everything. When Paul says that we are to be of the same mind, he does not mean we have to think the same thoughts or utter the same words like “Stepford Christians.” He means that we are to have the mind of Christ within each one of us so that we see everything from Christ’s point of view. Christian unity is not the same thing as uniformity. Uniformity provides a false sense of unity. It’s easy to get along with people who are just like you. (Well, I don’t know about “like you;” maybe I should say, “like me!”) Christian unity

is not a human achievement. Christian unity is a gift of God. The church is one because the church has one Lord. Christ only has one body. Our unity is not based on our theological heritage or the particular teacher we follow. It is not about Paul, Apollos or Peter. It is about Jesus Christ. The church is the body of Christ that comes to life in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit to all believers on Pentecost. Anything less robs the cross of Jesus Christ of its power.

Unity does not mean loss of individuality. As Ronald Richardson has noted in *Creating a Healthier Church*, “If ‘peace and unity’ means loss of identity and lack of conflict, then we will never be able to achieve this state in the church (p. 55).” He compares the unity of the church to a choral work in which the various parts are well sung. Each part is different. Together the parts are more beautiful than any one part by itself. Sometimes, instead of singing the part that God has given us to sing, we want to write parts for others to sing and conduct the whole piece ourselves. Instead of focusing on what somebody else should think, we need to ask ourselves if we are being faithful to the life God has given us. Our unity is so much richer when we are able not only to include those whose viewpoints are different from our own, but to delight in the ideas, the convictions and the witness of others. As the Psalmist says, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron...”

Christian unity is a gift of God, but it is also our goal. Unity is not always easy to demonstrate. Our fear of what is different often stops us from listening to others. Our jealousy of the gifts of others often keeps us from breaking down the walls that divide us. Our selfish ways prevent us from giving ourselves as Jesus did. Our need to be right walks all over the command of Jesus to love our neighbors and to pray for our enemies.

In his novel *Walking across Egypt*, Clyde Edgerton tells the story of a 78 year old country woman named Mattie who becomes friends with a young man. This young man has escaped from a Youth Detention Center. He comes to church with Mattie and is almost arrested. Clarence Vernon, the head deacon of the church, decides that Mattie’s involvement with this young criminal has made her unfit to head up the Lottie Moon Missionary Offering. He thinks her actions are destroying the holiness and peace of the church. Edgerton writes of Deacon Vernon:

He was going to have to straighten out the Mattie Rigsbee business, for the sake of the church. He knew exactly how to handle it. He would tell Mattie how much he appreciated what she had done for the church and also for this unfortunate young man. The thief. Degenerate, evil boy. But he would have to point out that it seemed to him as head deacon that the line had been crossed. You cannot take in...a known criminal. You can treat him well in prison, the Scriptures even speak of that, but anything beyond that is wrong; beyond that is where the Devil comes... (p. 214).

Fear, jealousy, bull-headedness and selfishness may divide us, but Holy Spirit unites us. The joy of Christian living comes when we recognize, affirm and express our spiritual unity in Christ. The joy comes when we can see the Holy Spirit in one another in spite of all our different ways of doing things. As the Psalmist says, “How very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in peace.”

In 2001, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church formed a Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the church. In selecting the members of the Task Force, the Assembly intentionally selected persons from all across the theological map with divergent opinions about how to interpret Scripture and how to apply Scripture to social issues. The Task Force is committed to interpreting Scripture together in a spiritual community even when the members of the body disagree with one another.

On five Wednesdays during Lent, our whole congregation is invited to be a part of these evening Bible studies that will help us understand the different ways we read the Bible and the different ways we apply the Scriptures to issues in our personal lives and society. We will be doing in community together some of the same things that our denomination’s Task Force is doing. Our prayer is that this study will lead us to greater wisdom and deeper love for one another. We will demonstrate that the church of Jesus Christ does have something to offer this divided community and world in which we live.

In Clyde Edgerton’s novel, *Mattie Rigsbee* had a gift that Deacon Vernon and even her own grown son didn’t value. One day her grown son was giving her the third degree about why on earth she had to help this troubled young boy.

Mattie replied, “I just feel bad about that boy having to go back to the Rehabilitation Center and all. I feel sorry for him.”

“Well, he don’t feel sorry for you.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, he... he, he’s a thief, a criminal, juvenile delinquent.”

“I still feel sorry for him. Having to sit in that place and can’t get out.”

“That’s the best place for him.”

“He’s never had a chance to hear the Gospel...”

He’s got as good a chance as anybody else to get the Gospel. They probably got Gideon Bibles all over the RC.”

“Nobody ever loved him...” (p. 184)

God had given Mattie a gift for loving. It was a gift her church needed to have the tear in the fabric of its life made whole like the body of Christ.

God has given each one of us special gifts. The church needs all of our gifts to be made whole. It is a beautiful day when we wake up to the truth of just how much we need each other in order to be the whole body of Christ. The people we need the most just may be the people who are the least like us. God has put them here for a purpose.

Last week I had the opportunity to meet Father Elias Chacour, an Arab Christian and Catholic priest who grew up in Galilee. As a boy he witnessed the destruction of his own village. He has seen the violent deaths of many Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze caught in the conflict in Israel and Palestine. Some of you met Father Chacour when he spoke at our Open Forum. He has been nominated several times for the Nobel Peace prize. Since 1965, Father Elias has served as the parish priest in the same small village in Galilee. Over the last forty years he has built an elementary school, a high school and a vocational school that serves Israeli Jews and Arab Muslims, Christians and Druze students. Most recently, in cooperation with the University of Indianapolis he has established an accredited interfaith and intercultural university. This summer 80 students from Mar Elias University will come to Indianapolis to study. Over the years, Father Elias has overcome hatred, persecution and government imposed obstacles. He is committed to a non-violence solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. His strength comes from his spiritual vision that Jews, Muslims, Christians and Druze are brothers and sisters. In his own words, he believes that “If you want peace and security, pursue justice and integrity...Justice means to learn how to forgive, to make concessions, to reconcile.”

If Father Chacour can be an agent of healing among Jews, Arab Christians, Muslims and Druze, then surely we can by God’s grace mend the tear in the fabric of Christ’s body. Maybe our greatest gift as a congregation is to show how people with different ideas, from different walks of life, and with different hopes and dreams can come together in the Spirit of the Lord to love one another, to care for one another and to delight in one another.

To be the body of Christ together is God’s gift and our goal. As the Psalmist says, “How very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity.”