

“CHRISTIAN UNITY”

Readings: Psalm 133

Ephesians 4:1-6

SINCE MANY CHURCHES around the world today will be celebrating “The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity,” our two scripture lessons were both selected with that theme in mind. The first, from the psalmist, extols the virtues of unity, comparing it to the “dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion,” while our second reading, from Ephesians serves as a reminder that there is “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

First observed in 1908, The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (the week is actually an eight day celebration known as an *octave*) was originally the brainchild of Father Paul Watson, an Anglican priest who converted to Roman Catholicism. He chose the eight-day period between January 18 (the feast of the Confession of Peter, a Protestant variant of the ancient feast of the Chair of Saint Peter) and January 25 (the feast of Saint Paul) for this annual ecumenical observance.

Watson believed that the only real way to achieve Christian unity was for all Christians to return to the Roman Catholic faith. However, in the 1930’s, Father Paul Couturier, the so-called “Father of Spiritual Ecumenism,” disagreed and championed a different approach. Said Couturier, “We must pray not that others may be converted to us but that we may be drawn closer to Christ.”

In the end, Couturier’s more inclusive view prevailed and paved the way for Protestant communions to participate. Since 1966, The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been a joint project sponsored by both The Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches.

But you may be saying to yourself, “Thanks for the history lesson, but what does all this have to do with the state of ecumenical relations today?” The answer I believe is “plenty.” While it is true that relations among Christians today are a lot less contentious than they were fifty years ago (to say nothing of nothing about 250 years ago) they are still not great. Yes, gone are the days such as the time one of Cardinal Cushing’s priests returned from a pastoral visit to the Boston suburbs. Cushing asked, “How are things going out there?” To which the priest replied, “Terrible, your eminence, terrible, but thankfully it’s going even worse for the Protestants.”

For the most part those days are now over. We no longer regard one another as competitors but whereas we used to look upon one another with disdain now we regard each other with something even more insidious—indifference. Today the ecumenical movement is regarded as an anachronism more than anything else. It is seldom if ever even mentioned in clergy circles and that is too bad. I am not suggesting we need to build a “super church” (such an organization is not necessary and would never work) but if Father Cotourier was correct, and the goal of ecumenism is to “draw closer to Christ,” then the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity reminds us that we still have a long way to go.

If it is true that the ecumenical movement is dead in the water, then what caused it to run aground? Several things. First, after the initial burst of energy back in the sixties, everyone just started taking the movement for granted. Inter-faith services became *de jour* and the fact that Protestants and Catholics began to intermarry, once looked upon as something of a scandal, became no big deal. Second, the funding sources for the ecumenical movement, so flush among the denominations back in the sixties, dried up and withered away. Third, after making peace with a variety of knotty theological issues (like baptism and communion) a host of perplexing social issues began to rear their ugly heads. The most pressing issues dividing the churches today are not only theological in nature, but also cultural and political. No one is arguing about the Nicene Creed anymore but they are sharply divided over issues like gay marriage or women’s ordination.

The denomination to which this church belongs, The United Church of Christ, was in a sense a product of the ecumenical movement. A merger of what was once four separate Protestant communions, the church was formed in 1957 and took as its motto the words “That they may all be one,” from the seventeenth chapter of John’s Gospel (John 17:21). Sadly, even the UCC seems to have dropped the ball as ecumenism has taken a back seat to issues surrounding women’s reproductive rights, the ordination of gay clergy, and other pressing social issues.

It’s not that I’m opposed to such issues; on the contrary, I wholeheartedly endorse them. The problem, at least from an ecumenical point of view, is that the church, in an effort to differentiate itself from the views of less progressive communities has been spending more time accentuating the things that make us different rather than the things we have in common.

In the end, despite our disagreements, the Christian Churches still hold more things in common than we do things that set us apart. The point of celebrations like The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is to emphasize the idea that we do in fact, have more things in common than we think we do, and to remember that even if we don’t always agree on everything there is still “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

And all in all, that is not a bad thing to remember. Saint Augustine, who despite some quirky theological views of his own, still remains one of theological heroes, once summarized the entire matter this way, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, and in all things charity.” Christianity after all, isn’t a matter of being *right*; rather it is a matter of being in right relationship—with God, with one others, and with ourselves.

It is true that the ecumenical movement has taken a back seat to the inter-faith movement in recent years and not without good reason. The rise of Islam coupled with an immigration explosion and advancements in communication technology have forced us to confront a wide variety religious philosophies and

ideas that once seemed like something we would never have to deal with. But now, deal with them we must.

Still, I don't see how we can expect to get along with people of other faith traditions if we cannot first of all get along with people in our own faith tradition. As Father Leo Polselli, priest at Most Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church in Saco, Maine said to our congregation when I invited him to preach during our Week of Prayer for Christian Unity service, "I feel like we are estranged cousins. I don't really know you but I know that we are somehow related."

I've said it many times before but I will say it again. The church will never be united by a common theology. It can only be united by a common mission. The only thing we all have in common is Christ. And to love Christ means to serve our neighbor particularly our neighbor who is sick, or lonely, or struggling, or poor. Our common task is to bring the love of Christ to bear on a world that is unbearable hurting, needy, and broken.

The question today is not whether the churches are capable of coming together to make a genuine difference in the world. Rather, it is a question of whether they want to. I have no doubt in my mind whatsoever that if the churches in the Hartford metropolitan area wanted to come together and work to eradicate the myriad problems that bedevil our beleaguered capital city they could do it. We could eliminate hunger in Hartford if we wanted. We could fix the problem of failing schools in Hartford if we wanted. We could eradicate substandard housing in Hartford if we wanted. But in order to do those things we have to come together as one body united not only by creeds but also by deeds.

The fractured nature of the church is by no means unique to followers of Christianity alone. Our growing awareness of other faith traditions reminds us that both Judaism and Islam, for example, also struggle to maintain unity amidst diversity. In Judaism, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed members often find themselves at loggerheads, while in the case of Islam, we are now all well acquainted with the contentious divisions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims resulting in a display of disunity and dysfunction more than anything resembling religious unity.

The Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung once remarked, "There will never be peace in the world until there is first peace among the religions of the world." I am sure he was right but then again, as the old song says, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." That is to say, while it is necessary that we have peace among the religions of the world it is imperative that we begin first of all by having peace among the churches of the world.

Let's not give up on the ecumenical movement quite yet. It is indeed, as the psalmist said, a "beautiful thing when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity." John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church once asked, "Although we may not all think alike can we not all love alike?"

My dear friends in Christ, I believe that we can. Each year the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity presents us with a choice. We can either chose to underscore our differences or highlight our similarities. There may be many creeds and many churches but there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."

That is the good news for this morning and every morning. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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January 22, 2012

