

Working for Unity

“Declare God’s glory among the nations, God’s marvelous works among all the peoples,” commands the Psalmist and we sing our response: “My loving Savior and my God, assist me to proclaim, to spread through all the earth abroad the honors of thy name.” It is one of the great privileges and great imperatives for the people of God throughout time, to tell everyone within our hearing the Good News of God’s love and forgiveness. Our passage from Acts records some of the aftermath of the Day of Pentecost, when the rough Galilean fisherman Simon Peter, last seen in public denying that he even knew Jesus, rose before the enormous crowd in Jerusalem who had gathered for the festival and, with an eloquence beyond his apparent capabilities, declared God’s marvelous works among all the people. From that day, the word did spread through all the earth abroad, carried by Jews of the Diaspora back to their adopted homes, that the Messiah had come and that the Kingdom of God was inaugurated. In wave after wave the news has spread with the words and loving deeds of thousand of saints both memorable and obscure. But as loyal followers of Christ share the Good News today, we have one obstacle, at least, not shared by most of them. As we share with our words the convictions that motivate our deeds, our listeners are likely to protest, “But you Christians can’t even agree and get along with each other!”

Sadly, it’s a just accusation. One of the things that we Christians have become known for is our continual squabbling over belief and practice, over just who it is, like John and James, who gets to sit closest to Jesus. It has become terribly damaging to our witness to the Prince of Peace, a great impediment to our own participation in the Epiphany work of revealing Christ to the world. But around the world, Christians continue to work to bring a unity back to the Church that allows for diversity without conflict, disagreement without rancor, difference without hostility.

We are in the midst of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the 103rd observance of a tradition begun in upstate New York by Fr. Paul Wattson who longed to bring Anglicans and Catholics back into communion some 480 years after Henry VIII’s first divorce caused the Church of England to deny the authority of the Pope. Since that first small step towards a modern ecumenical movement, the Week of Prayer has gained sponsorship from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Each year since 1968, these two organizations have worked with groups of churches from specific cities or countries to choose the Scripture and formulate the litanies which Christians around the world will share as they join in Jesus’ prayer that his followers would truly become one.

This year, the materials come to us from Christians in Jerusalem, perhaps the epicenter of religious strife as well as the city where our faith was born. I want to share a bit of what I have learned of those churches with you this morning as well as relating to you what I know of the ecumenical work in our own region. We’ll also take a deeper look at this short and familiar passage in Acts, famous for its portrayal of the harmony that existed among the earliest Christians, and see how its lessons uphold and extend our own practices.

The long history of religious conflict in Jerusalem needs, I am sure, very little rehearsal. Even before the time of Jesus, when Jerusalem, though occupied, was unquestionably the city of the Jews, religious divisions have raged and even become violent. To paraphrase an old song from Tom Lehrer, the Pharisees hated the Sadducees and the Zealots hated the Hellenists and the

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Essenes hated the Herodians and everybody hated the Gentiles. Sometime around A.D. 70, the synagogue and the church split for good and within 600 years both had a new religion to contend with as the Muslims took Jerusalem for their own in 638. The era of the Crusades in the 11th through the 13th centuries saw genocide by Muslims against Christians, by Christians against Jews and Muslims and even the slaughter of Christians by other Christians. While officially tolerated by a long string of Muslim rulers from the 1500s until the establishment of modern Israel, the various Christian communities that had settled in Jerusalem waged petty wars of words and blows against each other in jealous rivalry over control of the sites of Jesus' life and early Church history.

This situation, however, slowly began to change, according to the contributors to this week's literature, with the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land in 1964. Tentative steps toward reconciliation among the many churches represented in Jerusalem sped up during the violence of the first Palestinian intifada of the late '80s. "In the midst of a climate of insecurity, violence, suffering and death," writes the committee, "the heads of the churches started meeting in order to reflect together on what they could and should say and do together. They decided to publish common messages and statements and to initiate some common initiatives for the sake of a just and lasting peace." This movement toward a respectful ecumenism and improved interfaith relations has picked up speed in the last two decades. According to the WCC materials, for the approximately 150 – 200,000 Christians in Palestine and Israel, "ecumenism is part and parcel of daily life. Their constant experience is that solidarity and collaboration are of vital importance for their presence as a small minority in the midst of the majority of believers of the two other monotheist religions. As a consequence they share each other's joys and sorrows, in the midst of a situation of conflict and instability. Together they are ready to collaborate with Muslim and Jewish believers in preparing the ways for dialogue and for a just and lasting solution of a conflict in which religion has too often been used and abused. Instead of being part of the conflict," the churches of Jerusalem remind us, "true religion is called to be part of the solution... The churches in Jerusalem ask us to remember them in their precarious situation and to pray for justice that will bring peace in the Holy Land."

The experiences of the churches of Jerusalem should serve as a guidepost to us as we work to follow Jesus faithfully in an increasingly secular land. We are, after all, residents of the "None Zone," where a comfortable majority of our neighbors claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. We Christians have not yet become such a tiny minority in the Pacific Northwest as our Israeli and Palestinian brothers and sisters, who represent at most 2% of their land's populace, but the trends are not going our way. If we are to be successful in impacting our corner of the world for the good, if we are to extend the membership of the Beloved Community in South Snohomish County and Greater Seattle, then we must continue to work at sharing unity with the Christians who are different from us.

I use the terms "South Snohomish County" and "Greater Seattle" purposely, as these are the regional appellations of the two ecumenical groups with which I work most closely. As I've mentioned before, I was pleased when I was called as your pastor six years ago next week to find that Good Shepherd Baptist Church has a history of ecumenical involvement. Our congregation's vision statement, adopted in 2003 and renewed in 2008, includes the forecast that "Our congregation is actively engaged in ecumenical activities within the South Snohomish

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County religious community...” The Ministerial Agreement which I signed that week indicated that my duties were to include “maintain(ing) a cooperative relationship with the Evergreen Baptist Association, the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., and local ecumenical organizations.” I hope you’ll agree that I’ve done my part by serving as Convener for the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association for over two years ending this past summer and as a board member and now President-Elect and Interim Treasurer for the Church Council of Greater Seattle.

I want to bring you a brief update on those two ecumenical organizations. It has been a difficult past few years for our local groups as it has been for ecumenical institutions around the country. In part, this is due to ongoing economic woes – the recession has meant a reduction in direct contributions to these assemblies but has also put stress on the budgets of the churches that make up their membership, often meaning that pastors and chaplains with smaller staffs and fewer volunteers have fewer hours to devote to meeting together. It is also strangely true that the ecumenical movement is a victim of its own success. Younger clergy and church members simply take for granted that churches of various traditions will work together as necessary and see no reason to spend time tending the relationships that once were so fragile and, without attention, could become so again. Nevertheless, both the local Ministerial Association and the more widespread Church Council have persevered in the good work of Christian Unity.

You are all, of course, aware of the most recent cooperative project of the South Snohomish County group – the Emergency Cold Weather Shelter Network. We can give thanks to God that our uniquely configured little building, our church’s history of involvement in issues of housing and homelessness and the spirit of hospitality with which God has blessed us have given us a critical ministry of service in this lifesaving endeavor. I want to publicly thank Marty Hightower for his hours of faithful service in working with volunteers from other churches to ensure that our building is carefully cleaned and secured after each use as well as for helping with transporting our guests. Those of you with long memories will likely find this current ministry a fitting work for the group which founded our local food banks, the Helpline which used to be housed here, and many other efforts to aid our neighbors in need. While the Ministerial Association continues to meet monthly for conversation, prayer and business, our meetings tend to be sparsely attended unless a critical ministry opportunity presents itself. We are all just too darn busy otherwise. But our spirit of unity is strong – we genuinely enjoy being together as brothers and sisters in the faith when our schedules allow.

The Church Council of Greater Seattle is in a time of great transition. Those of us on the Board of Directors had already committed to creating a new paradigm for our ministry together, or more accurately to restoring an old one, when the economic downturn hastened and complicated our planned changes. We found that the Council had become more an independent non-profit social service provider than a true council of churches and we set about dismantling the direct service conglomerate in favor of a more flexible organization that could be more responsive to the needs and dreams of our member churches. We are also working to expand our membership roster as the Church Council had become primarily a club for Euro-American mainline Protestants with underrepresentation of minority cultures and evangelicals and a faltering relationship with the Archdiocese of Seattle. One of the spearheads of this membership work, incidentally, is our own Rev. Dr. Charlie Scalise, who serves on the Executive Committee of the

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Board with me. We are joined on the Board by four fellow American Baptists: Rev. Tim Phillips of Seattle First, Rev. Beverly Spears of University Baptist, Rev. Phyllis Beaumonte of Mt. Zion Baptist and Verlene Jones of Shiloh Missionary Baptist. The financial situation for the Church Council has been touch and go and many of us have put in long hours in navigating the shoals of the recession and transition but I am optimistic about the future for the 91-year old ministry. We have the potential to make a real difference in our community and a real contribution to the cause of church unity in Greater Seattle. Executive Director Michael Ramos is tentatively slated to come and speak twice at Good Shepherd during my planned absence this summer.

In the few minutes remaining, I want to turn back to our Scriptural picture of unity in the early Church and add my own comments to those of the churches of Jerusalem and of Dr. Deborah Gill of the Assemblies of God who wrote this year's commentary for the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute. The key verse is Acts 2:42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

It is helpful to remember just who Luke means by "they" in this verse. As I mentioned earlier, this passage comes as the postscript to the well-known story of Pentecost, when the apostles received the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit and men and women from all over the Jewish Diaspora in the Mediterranean world and Near East were able to understand Peter's preaching in their own languages. As a result, Luke tells us, "those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added." Heretofore in The Acts of the Apostles, Luke has been telling the story of the Twelve, the inner circle from Jesus' earthly ministry, plus the newly elected Matthias and some small group of others, including Mary the mother of Jesus and some other women, presumably Mary Magdalene was among them, as well as Jesus' brothers. Perhaps the gathering in the upper room was as many as the Seventy whom Jesus had sent out as teachers during his life but this seems unlikely. Suddenly then, we have gone from a tiny group to 3,000; from apostles to Church.

So what is it that we know about how this first Church, the Church of Jerusalem, conducted themselves at the very beginning of their time together? Luke says that "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." A more accurate if less smooth translation from the Greek might be, "they began devoting themselves..." There is a connotation here of an act which was not a one-time act but rather a habitual, continuing practice. What we hear in the remainder of chapter two is merely an amplification of verse 42 – how they fellowshiped, how often, and what resulted.

First, they heard the apostles' teaching. Meeting on a daily basis, as we learn in verse 46, they were taught by Jesus' closest friends about the life and ministry of Jesus and the Good News from God that he had come to give. Nearly 2,000 years later, we cannot hear the voices of those men and women, but the sense of their words if not the exact words themselves are preserved for us in the Gospels and Epistles of our New Testament as well as in Acts. We know from these records that the disciples followed Jesus' example in drawing upon the Scriptures known to them at the time, what we call the Old Testament and perhaps (he said in a shameless plug for "Soup, Salad, and Soul") some of the books of the Apocrypha as well. If we are to take this first Church

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as our model, as Baptists so often claim to do, then we, too, should be devoting ourselves to the teaching of the apostles on a daily basis by studying the Bible, New Testament and Old.

The new Church also devoted themselves to fellowship. This goes beyond our casual use of the word described by coffee hours and potluck dinners, although it includes that idea, too. The Greek word is *koinonia* and it has the same root as the phrase in verse 44, “(they) had all things in common.” As Dr. Gill writes, “The verbs... mean to make one a participant [in something], to share [something with someone], to have a share [in], and to participate [in]. “To share or participate in the deeds of others means to be equally responsible for them.” When these early believers saw a need, they accepted responsibility, took it on as their own, and did their part to meet it. In so doing they become “companions, partners, sharers.” Truly, this is the formation of the Beloved Community, when the love that people share allows them to become their brothers’ keepers in a way that turns back the sin of Cain, loving each other enough to be responsible for one another. It is the very picture of the love that Jesus commended: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” To give its meaning to our possession-obsessed society, Craig Keener calls the way of the first church, “the practice of radically valuing people over possessions.” Can we all say that we have continually devoted ourselves to such a practice?

Daily, the new followers of Jesus met together around a meal, each contributing what they could and dedicating it to the remembrance of Him who had died and rose again as they broke the bread and drank the wine which were the staples of their diet. Daily, they devoted themselves to the cycle of prayers common to all Jews at the time, in the morning and in the evening. For how many of us would these practices present a challenge? Probably for most of us. It is hard enough in our busy lifestyles to ensure that we even share one meal a day with the family members who share our homes – how often can we be expected to eat together as a church or in smaller groups from our church? And yet here is our model – day by day. How many of us have even a few scarce moments each day that we regularly reserve for prayer? Could we follow the daily regimen of prayer known as “the hours” which Christians regularly observed for centuries? Could we be as faithful as our Muslim sisters and brothers who stop everything in the midst of busy days to wash, kneel and pray?

And, after all, why should we even concern ourselves with such questions? What has this to do with our lives nearly 2,000 years later? The answer is, it makes a difference. Listen again to how Luke describes the results of this lifestyle for the first church: they had “the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” The goodwill of all the people – doesn’t that sound better than the disrepute into which our faith has fallen because of our own failures of love? Every day, Luke tells us, new people came to join their lives to those of the new Body of Christ because of the example they set. What could we do as Good Shepherd Baptist Church, do you suppose, if the Lord added to our number day by day?

Does it sound as if I’m asking a lot from all of us? Yes, I suppose it does. But let us not forget that we have before us the model of Christian unity, the example of what can happen when the people of God get serious about living out the way of Jesus. Let us not forget how we can

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change the world when we love each other, when we enter into true fellowship with all Christians, when we answer the call of God to hold God's people in our hearts.