

Being Changed

We've come again to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, another one of my favorite modern Christian observances. I'm glad that the timing this year left MLK Day out of the Week of Prayer because it allows me to preach both themes on consecutive weeks. Some years, the two celebrations are coincident and then I have to choose. For those who've not heard me on this subject previously, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has roots going back to 104 years ago. An Episcopalian priest named Fr. Paul Wattson was a great believer in ecumenical unity in general and reunification of Catholics and Anglicans in particular. He founded the Society of the Atonement to promote those goals in 1898 at Graymoor in Garrison, NY. The observation of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity spread slowly until ecumenical relations were given a boost by the Second Vatican Council from 1962 – 1965. In 1968, the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity began collaborating each year to choose scriptures and themes and to promote the Week of Prayer worldwide.

Each year, those scriptures and themes are provided by an ecumenical group of clergy and laypeople from a different country. This year, the country selected was Poland. One of the reasons I enjoy participating in this tradition is that I always get to learn about the history of the country providing the lessons and about the current state of Christian Unity in that country. Another reason I look forward to receiving the Graymoor Institute's materials every year is to discover what scripture and theme has been chosen. Sometimes, like this year, the results are surprising. After all, the focus scripture, which I just read, is usually more associated with funerals than with the ongoing effort to bring together the Body of Christ. And, as I've pointed out before, the ecumenical imperative, the ongoing call of Jesus that his followers might be one, is and has been deeply important to me. I live, after all, in an ecumenical family, and I've been blessed beyond measure by my sisters and brothers from across the spectrum of Christian denominations, creeds and churches. So, this morning, we'll take a little time to consider the history of Poland and how it has impacted ecumenism in that country and what lessons their situation has for us. And we'll dig into the words of Paul to discover why his vision of the end of earthly life also has relevance for the ongoing work of Christians in the here and now as well as for what becomes of us hereafter.

I grew up in a time and place when racial and ethnic stereotypes were more widely accepted and the now-fading tradition of the ethnic joke was commonplace. One of the staples in school-yard humor in those days was the Polack joke. In those rather lamentable bits of crude comedy, the précis was always that natives of Poland were naïve at best and outright stupid at worst. The Polish community was relatively large in St. Louis and I suspect that the jokes had their roots in the days when the Poles were the latest immigrant wave to arrive, not speaking much if any English, rural rather than urban, and often confused by what their new lives had brought them. The reality of course is that Poland as a country has a long and sometimes illustrious history and that it has produced men and women of amazing intellect and talent. The great astronomer Copernicus was a Pole as was Marie Curie, the groundbreaking physicist. The musical world would be a far different place without the composers Chopin or Shostakovich, the conductor Leopold Stowkowski, the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, the pianist Arthur Rubenstein, the great jazz drummer Gene Krupa, or rock-and-rollers Ray Manzarek of The Doors and D'arcy Wretzky of the Smashing Pumpkins. Possibly my favorite novella of all is "Heart of Darkness" by Joseph Conrad and the genre of science fiction has been shaped by Polish authors such as Stanislaw Lem and Roger Zelazny. I could go on and on, but I think you get the point. I do have to

Being Changed

mention one more famous Pole, though. I could lose my credentials as a baseball fan if I didn't drop the name of Stanisław Franciszek Musiał (Moo-shiau), better known as "Stan the Man" Musial.

We of the twentieth century, who can only remember a Poland divided or dominated by the more powerful states of Germany or the Soviet Union, may not even know that Poland was independent from the Dark Ages forward and a leading light among European nations in the 15th and 16th centuries. But Poland was conquered and divided again and again beginning in 1772, independent again only in brief periods until the nonviolent revolution of Solidarity brought new freedoms for the Polish people in the early days of the breakup of Soviet hegemony.

In the times of their independence and even as much as possible in times of foreign domination, the religious situation of the Poles has been marked by diversity and tolerance. Polish Christianity dates back to the missionary work of Cyril and Methodius in the ninth century. In fact, the traditional date of the founding of Poland as an independent state is 966, the baptismal date of Mieszko of the Piast family, who united the Slavonic tribes living in the Vistula river basin. Jews and Muslims were welcomed in Poland as they arrived in the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. And during the early days of the Protestant Reformation, when much of Western Europe was plunged into bloody religious conflict, primarily Catholic and Orthodox Poland became a haven for Protestant refugees because of the Polish policies of toleration. During a brief period of independence in 1791, the Polish parliament passed the world's second constitution (after that of the United States), guaranteeing freedom of confession and religious practice. Tragically, Poland's domination by the Nazis during World War II led to the near-eradication of the Jewish population – about 3.5 million Polish Jews died in the Shoah. But the spirit of religious acceptance continues to be strong. Although some 95% of the population is Roman Catholic, there are healthy communities among Orthodox and Protestant believers, including about 5,000 Baptists, whose history in Poland dates back to the nineteenth century.

Poland's history of years of political subjugation on the one hand and of ecumenical openness on the other helps to explain the development of this year's Week of Prayer theme by Polish Christians. This is a country where, as I believe for all people, the innate desire is to welcome the other, to be good neighbors even with those who are different. But their struggle for survival under various conquering forces has left its mark. Many Poles were complicit in the homicidal actions first of the forces of Hitler and later those of Stalin and his successors. The Polish believers who came together to work on this year's theme with the World Council of Churches are well aware of the long-term ramifications of contests which demand winners and losers. To be a winner means the temptation to abuse power and position. To be a loser can tempt one to bitterness, selfishness and reprisal. For centuries, the image of the Polish people has been that of geopolitical losers. But that image, in the world and among themselves, began to change, first, perhaps, with the elevation of Karol Cardinal Wojtyla, Archbishop of Krakow, to the papacy as John Paul II in 1978, then with the success of Solidarity in the '80s, which culminated in the free election of Lech Walesa as President in 1990. How, under Christ, does a formerly downtrodden people appropriately deal with victory?

The Gospels tell us that even Jesus' closest friends dealt with this problem. Apparently feeling that physical victory over the Romans was right around the corner, some of them began to argue

Being Changed

about which of them would be the greatest in the new kingdom. Jesus said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” As our presidential primary season screeches nastily on, this might be a particularly good lesson for our politicians to learn. Victory is defined by Jesus in a whole new way – not as who can shout the loudest or as who has the money to buy the most votes (I mean, advertising coverage) or who can win the latest round of “Pin the Sin on the Candidate,” but as who can best serve the people around them. According to our Polish brothers and sisters: “(Jesus’) words speak of victory through mutual service, helping, boosting the self-esteem of those who are “last”, forgotten, excluded. For all Christians, the best expression of such humble service is Jesus Christ, His victory through death and His resurrection. It is in His life, action, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection that we desire to seek inspiration for a modern victorious life of faith which expresses itself in social commitment in a spirit of humility, service and faithfulness to the Gospel. And as he awaited the suffering and death that was to come, he prayed that his disciples might be one so that world might believe. This “victory” is only possible through spiritual transformation, conversion. That is why we consider that the theme for our meditations should be those words of the Apostle to the Nations (found in I Corinthians 15). The point is to achieve a victory which integrates all Christians around the service of God and one's neighbour.”

Here we are thrown against the question of how we may rightly interpret a passage from Paul to the Corinthians which seems to be quite clearly about life after death as instead (or as well) speaking to us of life in our present circumstances. When Paul talks here about us being changed, his context is a discussion about life on the other side of the grave, isn't it? Well, yes and no. Those of you who've suffered under my preaching for long will have heard me from time to time throw out the grand theological term “proleptic eschatology.” This is a view of the Good News of Jesus that says that the “eschaton,” the end of time, is, through the universe-changing life of Jesus, “proleptic;” that is, it has broken into the present and influences the present through the Holy Spirit and through those who are open to the Spirit's work in their lives. This is the way in which we make understandable the paradox, established by Jesus himself, that the Reign of God, the Beloved Community, is both now and not-yet. “The time is coming and now is,” said Jesus, “when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.” It is quite possible to understand the words of Paul to the Corinthians not only as a promise for the future in our lives but also as a challenge to begin living lives that are transformed by Christ now.

Indeed, it is clear that Paul expects this change to happen even with some who continue to live on this earth. “We will not all die, but we will all be changed,” he says. He links this change to the “last trump,” the signal of the final victory of Jesus over the forces of sin, evil and death. But if we believe that victory in fact happened on Easter morning, upon the resurrection of Jesus from death and the grave, then we can claim the proleptic truth of that victory for all who believe right now. Paul continues, “For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.” But isn't that just another way of saying what he wrote to the Romans (“put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”) and also to the Galatians (“As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ”)? After all, when we “put on Christ,” do we not clothe ourselves with the immortal and imperishable parts of his nature? For what defines God, the Immortal and

Being Changed

Imperishable One better than love? When we consider what God would have us be, for all time in the presence of God and also here, in our lives, as we walk in the light of God, do we not turn to our beloved list of the fruits of the Spirit? Whenever we act in kindness and patience, in humility and gentleness, in joy and in peace, we are continuing the process of putting on Christ, of putting on imperishability and immortality.

It is in this way that we participate in God's ongoing act of creation, in the ultimate victory of Christ over death. It is in this way that we choose life, just as Moses urged the Israelites as he prepared for the end of his own earthly life. We who have accepted the gift of abundant and everlasting life from Christ do not only defeat death when our lives here end and our lives on the far side bank of Jordan begin. No, we are victors over death whenever we choose not to be selfish, whenever we reach out in love to another being. We are victors over death whenever we step between another person and harm and also whenever we live our own lives to the fullest. Whenever we reject the ways that imprison and injure others, whenever we reject the ways that imprison and injure ourselves, then we have moved closer to the imperishable and immortal truth for humankind that God has planned since the beginning. In Christ, we are victors over sin, victors over brokenness, victors over death.

That is why Paul writes, at the end of this passage, that we are to "be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." It is Paul's acknowledgement that he is not just talking about "pie in the sky, by and by when we die." When I was a boy, I visited from time to time the little Baptist church where my maternal grandparents worshipped, New Bethel General Baptist Church. As is so often the case where the people are poor and work, when you can get it, is backbreakingly hard, the consummation of life was a favorite topic for sermon and song. I remember singing with gusto the great old songs about heaven: "When We All Get to Heaven," "I'll Fly Away," "In the Sweet By and By," "When the Roll is Called Up Yonder," "O That Will Be Glory (For Me)," "On Jordan's Stormy Banks." I still like to sing those songs, though I try not to impose them on others. And, you know, it's right to look forward to that day. It's part of God's promise to us. But that is not our only victory. We also have victory here and now – our labor is not in vain. Our victory over death comes every day that we are faithful in following Christ as well as when "we meet him in the air."

Lest we grow proud and intemperate in our promised victory, it is important for us to remember that this victory is a victory without losers. By that, I mean what Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." There are to be no losers among our fellow human beings in our victory. Indeed, how could there be when our weapons are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? This is why our brothers and sisters in Poland chose this odd passage from the writings of Paul as our focus for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. When we claim this victory, promised in Christ Jesus, as our own, we are not the kind of victors that the Poles fell to in their fights against the Nazis or the Soviets or against their many other enemies in the centuries of their subjugation. No, we and they are reaching to become a different sort of victor altogether – unselfish, giving, accepting, loving. This is a victory we share with all who call on the name of Jesus, not one we win against some of them.

Being Changed

Whether we are Baptist or Lutheran, Catholic or Orthodox, Fundamentalist or Liberal, we are all a part of the victorious Body of Christ. We are simply different members of that Body, with different gifts and different functions, all in need of one another.

Michael Kinnamon, soon to retire as the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, said recently that if the ecumenical movement is to succeed, it will be because Christians have claimed the difference that Christ makes in our lives. Without this, he said, our ecumenical efforts become merely a front for our chosen political ideology. That is why this teaching of Paul is significant to ecumenism. If we truly hold to the prophetic truth of our being changed, then we are not in competition with each other to see who can become the greatest in the kingdom. If we rest in the fact of our change, then we can both see our importance as individuals in the plan of God and retain our humility as brothers and sisters in loving relationship to each other. As Paul wrote earlier in this same letter, we still perceive God's truth as if reflected in a foggy, cracked mirror, "through a glass darkly." Only by living in the great gifts of God to us, faith, hope and love, can we truly embody now, here, the change that is to come in our lives, and the greatest of these is love. And so, my sisters and my brothers, let us claim the transforming power of God through Christ in our lives, empowered by the Holy Spirit as we walk together, hand in hand, side by side, caring for each other and spreading the news that Our Loving Creator walks abroad on the Earth, loving, forgiving and cherishing each of us. That is how the world will come to know new life in Christ, through our love. Amen.