

## Presidential Address

Two and a half years ago, after nearly a year's worth of hard work in a strategic planning effort that continues to be worked out in the day to day business of the Church Council, our Board of Directors adopted the following mission statement for the organization: "Our mission is to create a diverse community of churches and individuals who respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ by building relationships of unity while working collaboratively for the common good." These words were not chosen lightly; their connotations and allusions were all deeply considered. Indeed, some of us began to fear that the wrangling and wordsmithing would absorb us until Christ comes again and that we'd never get anything practical done. But in reality, those deliberate decisions have been and will be of critical importance to setting our path forward as a council of churches that is both responsive to the leadings of the Holy Spirit among all of our constituents and capable of leading the Body of Christ in Greater Seattle through our own special gifting.

I've been asked tonight to speak briefly about my own vision for the next two years at the Church Council of Greater Seattle and I wish to do so within the context of that mission statement. As I share with you what some of these words and phrases mean to me, I hope that you will find points of agreement, ideas that stir you as much as they do me, because if we are to succeed in our high calling together, we will need the passion of everyone present here and of many others, both those whom we represent and those parts of the Body of Christ who have not yet found a home in the Church Council. We will need your passion, we will need your ideas, we will need your time and we will need whatever treasures you are moved to share with us. We, all of us together, need all of each other because that is what it means to be the Body of Christ.

We are so easily divided, aren't we, even when we pray for and try to work toward the unity of the Body. To find a unity that embraces and celebrates diversity is a hard job. Diversity too easily becomes division. The forces of systemic evil in our world move to make us see diversity as threat rather than blessing. But the blessing of God is that our diversity enables us to learn from each other, to understand God's creation and God's will in ways that we would not if we were a homogenous group. The truth of the matter is, we need each other's diversity to come anywhere near a complete understanding of God's creation, let alone the Creator of All. We need Black folks and White folks, Latinos and First Nations people, Japanese and Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Ch'in and Karen. We need the Scandinavians from Ballard, Swedes AND Norwegians. We need the Gays and the Straights. Good sons of the South like me even need y'all Yankees, although I'm still trying to determine why.

There are other divisions which we face as the Body of Christ, some even harder to overcome than others. To truly be what we can be as the Church Council of Greater Seattle, we need to celebrate the diversity of our theological understandings. Those who do things "decently and in order" need to learn from the improvisational worship and polity of the Pentecostals and vice-versa. Those whose structure is congregational need to listen to those with bishops and other hierarchical offices and vice-versa. Evangelicals and liturgicals, Calvinist and Arminian, Orthodox and Tridentine, all have their roles to play. As the Body of Christ, we need both the flying imaginations of the liberals and the careful grounding of the fundamentalists. Hear me, my brothers and sisters, I am convinced that those with whom we disagree most profoundly on matters of theology are likely those who have the most to teach us.

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Nor can we allow the political stances that world calls for us to make to be a threat to our unity in Christ. Too often, partisanship in this area has been allowed to divide Christian from Christian and this cannot be. Democrat or Republican, Tea Party or Coffee Party, Libertarian or Green, no party devised by human beings should supersede our calling to be one in faith, one in baptism, one in Spirit, one in the Lord. As the great English author C. S. Lewis wrote, “The (one) who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our friend. (They) need not agree with us about the answer.”

My sisters and brothers, without the diversity which your Church Council has set us to seek, we are like the eye that says to the hand, “I have no need of you,” or the head that says to the feet, “I have no need of you.” To be a truly diverse community of churches and individuals, to be the Body of Christ, we need all of each other.

So, how do we go about building relationships of unity out of our often-quarreling, fractious but beautiful diversity? Some of you may have recognized my reference a moment ago with the dialogs between body parts to Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. We sometimes forget that it was immediately after talking about this blessed diversity in the Body of Christ that Paul offered his famous chapter on love. Our many differences can only be rescued from the evil of division and become our strength through the conscious and avid pursuit of love. We cannot be satisfied to tolerate each other; we cannot simply respect each other. We must love each other. We must listen patiently, even when we are in deep disagreement; we must be kind even when we have been hurt. We cannot insist that only our way is the right way. We must believe in the Spirit which inhabits all those who seek to follow Christ, even when the way they take seems different from our own. None of us can perceive the whole truth of God – our sight is clouded. We must listen to each other and pray for each other in love.

I am deeply convinced that the holy work of loving each other even in disagreement, of learning to celebrate rather than fear our diversity of race or ethnicity or creed or practice, is central to our ability to respond to the Gospel of Christ Jesus. Without that love, without that celebration, what can we tell the world about the freedom and forgiveness we have in God through Christ? How can we convince those who are desperately looking for new answers to life’s problems that we have something to offer when all they see from us is strife? How will those in need be able to accept our gifts of caring as genuine offerings of love to them when they are convinced that we don’t even love each other?

Only once we celebrate our diversity can we build relationships of unity. Only once we set aside our own pride and prejudices can we truly be Good News in Greater Seattle. It is then that we can fully work collaboratively for the common good. As a good Baptist, I’m inclined to rephrase that in my own tradition with the words of another good Baptist, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. At Good Shepherd Baptist Church, we like to talk about working toward the Beloved Community. You see, I’ve come back to love again. But whether we call it the common good or the Beloved Community or the Kingdom of God, we have a lot of work to do, my sisters and my brothers, here in Greater Seattle. Just like in other cities around our country and the world, the systemic evils of racism, of sexism, of age-ism, of all kinds of “-isms” which devalue anyone we choose to call “the other” from child of God to “thing,” these evils are rampant and must be

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confronted. The need for God's restorative justice in our community is great, when too many are out of work or have their work devalued, when too many are hungry or afraid, when families sleep in cars and veterans sleep under overpasses, when the equal administration of human justice depends on the color of your skin or the depth of your pocketbook or, God help us, on what you choose to wear when you walk to the store. If we are to truly pursue a common good, we must remember Dr. King's words that "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." But we cannot pursue our mission, we cannot work for the common good, we cannot build relationships of unity, we cannot respond truly to the Good News of Jesus Christ if we do so out of anger, if we do so out of a sense of our own righteousness, if we do so without humility. My brothers and sisters, we must love one another, every last member of the Body of Christ, every last seeking soul. Without love, no matter how noble our endeavors, no matter how great our accomplishments, no matter how many we feed or house or free, we have gained absolutely nothing.

To close, although it is not yet time for a formal benediction, I'd like to share with you a benediction I learned from my pastor while I was in seminary, Rev. Steve Shoemaker. It was not original to him but is taken from Scripture and from the work of Rev. William Sloane Coffin. It is this:

May the Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

May God give you grace never to sell yourself short;

Grace to risk something big for something good;

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

So, may God take your minds and think through them;

May God take your lips and speak through them;

May God take your hearts and set them on fire. Amen.