

Praying for Unity

It has been 100 years since the inception of the program that became the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.” In January of 1908, Father Paul Wattson, Episcopal priest and co-founder of the Society of the Atonement at Graymoor in Garrison, NY, introduced what was first known as a Prayer Octave, eight days of prayer, for Christian Unity. In 1968, that program received endorsement from both the Vatican and the World Council of Churches and was observed by churches and parishes around the world. In part, perhaps, due to this annual reminder that Christians are called to be one in Christ, the spirit of ecumenism has spread and deepened. When I was a boy, good Catholics and Protestants avoided each others’ houses of worship. Now, the wall between denominations is often more of a permeable membrane. I have led groups of clergy from a wide variety of traditions both as an executive and as a volunteer.

Of course, there have been additional challenges to Christian unity in the past 100 years as well. While individual denominations are reaching out to each other, those same denominations may find themselves being rent from inside. Even as the Anglican Communion, for example, has drawn closer to the Church of Rome and various Lutheran bodies during the last century, there is now real danger of a schism between the Episcopal Church in the United States and the rest of the Anglican world over issues of human sexuality, the same issue that has threatened unity among Presbyterians, Methodists and, of course, American Baptists. As always, Baptists seem particularly good at being fractious. The fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention not only resulted in the formation of at least two new denominations or quasi-denominational bodies but also caused the SBC’s withdrawal from such previously unifying groups as the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, now known as the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty. It is with tempered optimism indeed that I prepare to travel at the end of the month with Charlie Scalise and Charlotte Keyes to Atlanta for the Celebration of the New Baptist Covenant, a nearly unprecedented attempt to bring together Baptists of a variety of denominations for conversation about what we agree on, rather than on what we have to fight about.

So why, in the midst of all this historically-rooted conflict and intramural squabbling, should we continue to pray for Christian Unity? Is it really all that important? Can it be achieved, ever? How will we get there and what good will it do us?

To begin with, we pray for Christian Unity both for spiritual and for pragmatic reasons. We pray for Christian Unity because Jesus, whom we proclaim as Lord of our lives, prayed for Christian Unity. The Gospel according to John records that Jesus prayed fervently for his disciples shortly before he was betrayed: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one... I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” And before Jesus prayed for unity among his followers, he instructed them in no uncertain terms to work for unity: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” We must work for Christian unity because it is the will of Christ. We must work for

Praying for Unity

Christian unity because our continued disunity, disrespect and lack of love for one another damages our ability to achieve our mission; to spread the Good News of God's love for all Creation.

We are also called to work for Christian unity for a very pragmatic reason. We're stuck with each other. Whether we agree with those "other" American Baptists in the Northwest or not, the rest of the world perceives us as one, so we'd better find ways to agree. Most of the world has no idea that there are different kinds of Baptists, so we must come together in events like the one in Atlanta to figure out how to be one. The vast majority of our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu neighbors haven't the slightest idea what separates Baptists from Presbyterians, Lutherans from Catholics, Pentecostal from Orthodox. They see Christianity as an undifferentiated body. We need to learn to find true unity. On our ever-shrinking planet, with a global economy and instantaneous worldwide communication, all of us impact each other, whether we mean to or not. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a visionary in many ways, addressed this very idea in his published Letter from a Birmingham Jail. "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," Dr. King wrote, "tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Of course this also leads to the conclusion that we must seek unity on a number of fronts with all humankind and not just our brothers and sisters in the Christian faith. But more on that later.

In writing what may be his earliest extant letter, the first epistle to the church at Thessalonica, the apostle Paul also dealt with the problem of unity among Christians. "Be at peace among yourselves... be patient with (each other). See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another..." I'm sure that when this letter was read aloud for the first time, more than one of the Thessalonians grumbled under their breaths, "Easy for him to say!" I think all of us would agree that it's not always easy to keep peace in the church family. We Baptists celebrate our spiritual liberty to come to our own understandings of God and God's work in the world and in us, but our differing viewpoints mean that there are countless points of potential friction between us. Little differences, if not held in love, can become big arguments. I was laughing with a couple of you earlier this week over the old ministers' axiom that music causes more trouble in the church than almost anything else. In the past two weeks, I've been told by longtime, respected members of this body that we are singing too many unfamiliar hymns and that we should more new hymns. If we don't hold each other in love, respect each other's differences, we're not going to be able to be at peace among ourselves. I know that I need to listen carefully to Paul's admonition to be patient. The Greek Paul uses literally means "have a long fuse." As my family and some of the rest of you can attest, a long fuse isn't always one of my virtues.

No, the search for unity is never easy; not in the local church body, not within our Baptist family, not in the worldwide Church with all its diversity of belief and practice. I think, though, that Paul points to the key to this quest in the last verses of this morning's Scripture. As hard as we may work at peacemaking, at patience, at doing good to one another, we are simply not going to be able to make our interpersonal relationships work as they should without proper attention to our individual relationships with our Loving Creator. Only when we practice living in the presence of God will we be able to live in each other's presence in anything that resembles harmony. We must strive to understand what God wants for God's people before we can achieve

Praying for Unity

unity for it is only through giving up our own definitions of what the Body should be and seeking God's will that we can truly come together. Paul's solution to living within the will of God and creating unity in the Church: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you."

Let's be sure we understand what Paul is talking about. Our culture puts a great emphasis on being happy, on the pursuit of self-centered desires for our own delight without regard to the costs to others. But joy, in Paul's context, can come even in the face of persecution, which the Thessalonians were almost certainly facing. For the Christian, true joy and fulfillment is found in relationship with God through Christ and in living the Christ-like life, including what Jesus called "taking up one's cross." "Joy," William Loader writes, "is not the antithesis to pain and suffering. It is not an antidote to the cross or Gethsemane, but an attitude which finds life there and finds nurture and rest in feeding on brokenness and a poured out life." Joy comes regardless of circumstances when we are focused on a living relationship with our living God.

But we are not called to be masochists, reveling in the pain and suffering we may encounter in life. Paul writes, "Give thanks in all circumstances," not "give thanks for all circumstances." An approach which thanks God for pain is dubious theology. Although God will use all circumstances for the ultimate good of those who love God, as Paul wrote to the Romans, God is not the author of pain and suffering. Not everything that happens in this world happens according to the will of God, otherwise Jesus would not have taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is God's will for us to give thanks because when we stop and consider what we have to be grateful for, it turns out that there is quite a lot. Even in the midst of sickness, there is life and where there is life, there is blessing. To be thankful means to consider the source of all good gifts, the Father, and to draw into closer relationship with our Loving Mother/Father God.

Joyful focus on living relationship with God, giving thanks to the Creator for all good gifts, these are the activities that we experience in prayer. In our rational modern theologies, we often have an awkward response to the subject of prayer. Rev. Daniel J. Earheart-Brown, President of Memphis Theological Seminary, hit the nail on the head in a sermon on this year's Christian Unity theme: "While some Christians use prayer as a means to "claim a blessing" from a God who lavishes prosperity on the faithful, others question the naiveté of devout Christians praying in their comfortable sanctuaries while the powers and principalities do their work of destroying the earth and its people. On the one hand, prayer is trivialized into a technique for gaining personal wealth. On the other, prayer is seen as an impotent waste of time." In resolving this modern conundrum, Rev. Earheart-Brown goes on to remind us that Paul's message to the Thessalonians did not divorce prayer from action. The apostle gave very specific examples of how he thought his friends were to work out their mission as well as praying for it. Wise Christians have always understood that work and prayer must be combined. The motto of the Benedictine order, for example, is "To pray is to work; to work is to pray."

Earheart-Brown draws an example of the merger of prayer and work from the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. On the one hand, Dr. King wrote, "I am certain, we need to pray for God's help and guidance in this integration struggle, but we are gravely misled if we think the struggle will be won only by prayer." On the other hand, his widow, Coretta Scott King, wrote that prayer

Praying for Unity

was “a daily source of courage and strength” for her husband. She related a story of the days of the Birmingham Bus Boycott, when anonymous, threatening phone calls to the family home were a daily occurrence. Upon being awakened one night by such a call, Dr. King rose from bed and retreated to the kitchen for coffee. His wife heard him at the kitchen table, praying: “Lord, I am taking a stand for what I believe is right. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I have nothing left. I have come to the point where I can't face it alone.” She writes that he told her later, “At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear a voice saying: ‘Stand up for righteousness; stand up for truth; and God will be at our side forever.’” Prayer is a necessary part of the actions we take to impact the world. Our actions are to be a living out of our unceasing prayers.

“In the end,” Earheart-Brown writes, “authentic Christian prayer is neither a means of manipulating God, nor is it withdrawal from the hard work before us. In prayer, we place ourselves and our work in the context of God’s purposes, and in so doing, we receive strength for the journey toward true Christian unity.”

Again, a word of clarification: to pray without ceasing does not mean to walk around all day mumbling spiritual formulae. As the Rev. Dr. Ben Witherington of Asbury Theological Seminary wisely points out in his commentary on this text, Paul is resorting to a use of “dramatic hyperbole” common to preachers. The point, writes Witherington, is “prayer that is persisted in until a proper outcome transpires.” For us to pray without ceasing for Christian Unity is to make sure that we continue to pray and act in ways that promote the ecumenical ideal until we see its arrival. It will likely be a lifelong calling but we have seen advances in my lifetime and by the grace of God, we will see more.

Praying for Christian Unity does not necessarily mean praying for Christian uniformity, although I am quite sure that some who are praying today have that as a goal. To my mind, that would be a decidedly un-Baptist outcome. I would prefer to borrow the phrase suggested by The International Preparatory Group for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: “a reconciled diversity.” That phrase, I think, reflects our historical Baptist tenets of soul liberty and interdependence. We are not called to march in lockstep with our brothers and sisters in the Catholic or Lutheran or Pentecostal traditions. Instead, we are called to be true to our own faith heritage, seeking to apply the truth of it to our own lives with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Bible and our church community, while simultaneously honoring the convictions of those who pursue a different walk of faith in Christ. It is what Brian McLaren called in a recent book, “A Generous Orthodoxy.” It seems to me to be an honest response to the call of Jesus that we should love one another in a society that is perhaps more multi-cultural and multi-faithed than any previously experienced by humankind. After all, as the International Preparatory Group points out, “unity naturally expresses itself in diversity. It is unity in diversity which reflects the mystery of communion in love, as seen in God’s own being.” A good reminder that we worship God who is revealed as Three-in-One.

And let us not forget, as I alluded earlier, that we are also called to love our neighbors of other faiths. While we have an imperative from Jesus to make disciples, true love of our neighbors

Praying for Unity

must include respect for their faith, particularly when dealing with those who share our belief in the One God revealed in the Scriptures, Jews and Muslims. At “Soup, Salad & Soul” for the next four weeks, we will be using a study from the Baptist Center for Ethics entitled, “Common Will for the Common Good: Nurturing Baptists’ Relationships with Jews.” Too often, we and those who share the heritage of the Baptist movement have sinned against the lineal descendants of the Children of Israel with anti-Semitism both overt and accidental. As Paul reminded the Romans about the Jews, “to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.” We must seek to honor, to understand and to live in love with our Jewish brothers and sisters. And I hope that many of you are aware of the open letter to Christians from 138 Muslim scholars from around the world called, “A Common Word Between Us and You.” The letter seeks “to declare the common ground between Christianity and Islam” using supporting passages from the Bible and the Koran and to “give (Christians and Muslims) a starting point for cooperation and worldwide coordination.” A gracious and loving response called “Loving God and Neighbor Together” has been signed by hundreds of Christian leaders, which gladdens my heart. I am sorry to say that certain Evangelical Christian leaders have attacked this response as a “betrayal” and as “naiveté that borders on dishonesty.” Once again, our lack of Christian Unity raises its head even in response to overtures of “reconciled diversity” from another faith tradition.

Still, I believe we must continue to pray without ceasing for the cause of Christian Unity. It is important to our souls. We are so diminished when we cannot appreciate the honest response to God’s love from those whose hearts and minds are pulled towards God in a different way than ours. If all we will admit is our own constructs and heritage of faith, we lose the opportunity to grow towards wholeness from exposure to the orderly polity of the Presbyterians, to the ecstatic worship of Pentecostals, to the beauty of Orthodox chant and iconography, the majesty of the ceremonies of Roman Catholic Church, or even the rock-solid emphasis on the basics of our own faith by our more conservative brothers and sisters. And, perhaps more importantly, Christian Unity is important to our mission. How can we convince the world that God loves us all when we are engaged in hating each other? When we hold each other up for ridicule or vile slander, how can we convince the world to follow the Prince of Peace? My sisters and brothers, it cannot be. And so we must pray without ceasing for our “reconciled diversity,” fully recognizing that in this Beloved Community, which is both here and yet to come, it falls to each one of us to love and to honor each other so that the world might say in amazement, “See how they love one another! Surely, the truth is with them.” May God bless our prayer for unity. Amen.