

Uncommon Kindness

Since January of 2006, when I was still in my first year of ministry among you, we have dedicated one Sunday in January to mark the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church. In the past, some of us also joined in a celebration during the week sponsored by the Church Council of Greater Seattle. No such gathering is taking place this year, which saddens me. Whether it is through the busy-ness of everyday life, the internal struggles of denominations, the seemingly-widening divide between conservative and liberal Christians, or just the assumption that what needs to be done has been done, there doesn't seem to be a lot of energy in the ecumenical movement these days. The South Snohomish Ministerial Association, which founded the food banks and the Cold Weather Shelter in this area and did a great deal of other good work in the community, pretty much dissolved a few years ago. Oddly, it has been not a pastor but Lynnwood's police chief, Tom Davis, who's done the most for the local ecumenical movement in the last few years, with his "Cops and Clergy" program, which gathers ministers from across the religious spectrum once a quarter. I was delighted a few months ago when my colleague and friend, Rev. Gail Rautmann of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, started gathering a few like-minded clergy for coffee each month. But things are certainly not as they were.

I note all this because ecumenism is important to me. I've told this story before – although my earliest church memories and heritage are Southern Baptist, I spent three years in Church of England schools from age 5 to 8, came under the spiritual guidance of an Episcopal and a Jesuit priest in college, and married a Roman Catholic. I really couldn't help but be ecumenically-minded. Perhaps more importantly, I have always resonated with the prayer of Jesus in John 17, which we are studying under Pam and Charlie in Adult Sunday School just now, when Jesus prayed that all his disciples "might be one." Christian Unity was important to Jesus and, so, I think, it should be important to us.

It is clearly important to Christians on the islands of Malta and Gozo, who chose the theme for this year's Week of Prayer. Before we explore why that might be so, let me ask, how many of you know where Malta and Gozo are? Despite Malta's relative fame, think of the Maltese dog, the Maltese cross, or "The Maltese Falcon," I confess I knew only that Malta was somewhere in the Mediterranean but not where. Malta and its smaller companion, Gozo, are just to the south of the southern tip of Sicily, which is often thought of as the "ball" being kicked by the "boot" of Italy. A little farther away, to the west of Malta and Gozo, is the eastern coast of Tunisia. Malta and Gozo stand at the crossroads of Europe and Africa, of civilizations and religions, and their history reflects this. Ruled over in turn by "the Carthaginians, the Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Swabians, the Aragonese, the Knights of the Order of St John, the French and the British, Malta became an independent nation within the British Commonwealth in 1964. In 2004, it joined the European Union." Because of this history, the islands have a remarkable mix of Christian communities, despite being within the ecclesiastical orbit of Rome since the visit of Paul. In addition to the Roman Catholics, there are communities of Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Greek, Russian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Ethiopian, and Coptic Orthodox. The people of Malta and Gozo almost can't help but be ecumenical.

I want to call your attention to the art on the cover of our bulletins this morning, commissioned by the committee from Malta. It beautifully portrays the theme and scripture of this year's Week of Prayer. Just as in the story of Paul's shipwreck in Acts, which ends happily in the arrival of

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the castaways in Malta, the storm clouds in the distance are breaking up and a bright day is dawning. As so often in art, the rays of the sun, repeated in the frame of the picture, call to mind God's blessings and love. The artist has chosen not an exact representation of the story of Paul but rather a depiction of current day travelers in danger arriving not on floating debris from a broken ship but in an overcrowded motorboat, calling to mind all the desperate stories of refugees from the Middle East and Africa attempting to reach the relative safety of Europe or those coming from the Caribbean and Central America to the U.S. More on that in a moment. The travelers are helping each other out of the boat, forming a human ladder to help their companions to land. Atop the short bluff, the modern Maltese act as their ancestors did to Paul, eagerly and kindly assisting the travelers, helping them up onto dry land, welcoming them to their nearby city. It's worth noting that Maltese Christians still mark February 10th each year in a celebration of Paul's arrival.

In Acts 28:2, Luke, the author of "Acts," notes, "The (Maltese) showed us uncommon kindness." We should stop here and take note. Hospitality to strangers was, after all common in that age. Writing in the materials for this year's Week of Prayer published by the Graymoor Institute, Dr. Amy Oden of the St. Paul School of Theology in Oklahoma City notes that "hospitality was a civic duty across most of the empire." She reminds the reader, however, that hospitality was also based to large extent on the status of the guest. Paul's party included the owner and pilot of the ship and a Roman Centurion, as well as common soldiers and sailors and merchants. But Paul was part of another group from the shipwreck survivors. He and an uncounted number of others were prisoners. Did their Maltese hosts know this when they showed them all "uncommon kindness?" It is unlikely that Paul and his fellow prisoners were chained – they would surely have drowned bearing heavy chains in the stormy sea while clinging to bits of flotsam. But it's also likely that the first task of the Centurion, Julius, and his men would have been to round up the prisoners on shore and put them under guard. They were responsible with their very lives for the captivity of those given to their charge. So, it's likely that Paul's status would have been made very clear to the Maltese. If normal standards had prevailed, Paul and the other prisoners would have been packed off to a local prison. There, again, based on the standards of the age, they would have been dependent upon friends for their upkeep. Luke, whom Paul's Letter to the Colossians tells us was a physician, may have been traveling with Paul for this very reason, prepared to practice medicine for fees in order to feed both himself and Paul and any other Christians in the group of prisoners. Paul's situation was very, very vulnerable. Nevertheless, Paul and the other prisoners were included in the "uncommon kindness," even before Paul's miraculous escape from the viper.

It's unlikely, though not impossible, that Paul and Luke have stumbled into a group of Christians on Malta. For one thing, Luke would have been likely to note such an occurrence, as he does in other episodes in Acts. For another, there is no record of an earlier missionary visit to Malta, nor are the Maltese named among the visitors to Jerusalem during Pentecost who took the Good News of Jesus home with them. So, when we read of "uncommon kindness" toward the travelers, we must remember that this hospitality is being offered by pagans, worshippers of the gods of Rome or Greece or of the islands themselves. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called on his followers to be more loving than the pagans in the nations surrounding them: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax

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collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?” The Maltese were uncommon Gentiles, practicing “uncommon kindness.”

Well, what does all this mean for us, American Baptist Christians of Greater Seattle in the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Twenty? Let’s start with our conduct to one another. We call each other “church family” and that is a good start. I’ve observed and participated over the last fifteen years as you all have celebrated together in times of joy and rallied around each other when times are hard. I am proud of and grateful to all of those who have visited each other in hospitals, carried food to those recovering or grieving, encouraged each other with smiles and hugs and gifts and other signs of family love. These are good things, marks of God’s loving Spirit at work.

I’m encouraged, too, by the way that you all have mandated that I should be your representative to both ABC and ecumenical groups in our area. Others in our church family have helped to bear this burden as well. I’m sure I’ll forget some but to name a few, Marty Hightower and Jules Butler have served as representatives to the Evergreen Association Board, as have Rev. Guantai and Rev. Saquic. Lee Campbell and Lynn Melby have served on the Washington Baptist Convention Board; Connie Boyer, Steve Calkins, and Denise Aanenson on the Seattle Baptist Union Board. Many of you have supported Evergreen by your presence at events and with financial support. Again, these are marks of God’s loving Spirit at work.

But all of that is “all in the family,” so to speak. How are we doing in reaching out in kindness and hospitality to those who are not Baptists, are not, perhaps, even Christians? How are we doing in showing “uncommon kindness” to those who come to us in need, those who come from far away places, those who come with unsavory reputations? Again, I think there is reason to believe that we are on the right track. If the walls of this building were to become transparent, we could look to our north to see the community gardens, where for years members of our wider community have found a place of welcome. We could look to our west and see Shepherd’s Garden, where the majority of the impoverished residents speak little if any English. We could look to our east and see Shepherd’s Village, where an ever-changing group of those in need include those struggling with addiction or mental illness or both, those who’ve served time for both misdemeanors and felonies, those whom others in our broader community would gladly cast out. Fellowship Hall and the Youth Lounge are gathering places for those seeking recovery from addiction, as well as children and parents from our broader community. And here, in this very room, we embrace as sisters and brothers those who’ve come as refugees or at least ex-patriots from around the world. We also host brothers and sisters from the Church of God, the Assembly of God, and those of many faiths who make up Living Interfaith Church. I am blessed to be the pastor of a church where people take seriously the call of Jesus to welcome, to feed, to house, and to clothe.

But in our world, in our nation, especially, we cannot do what we do and then say, “we are done.” Our witness in word and deed is needed, my sisters and my brothers. Look again at the artwork on the cover of the bulletin and remember that on coasts that look just like this, in Europe and in our own beloved country, boats that look just like this are being warned off, turned away, back into the dangerous sea where they founder and capsize and sink and the

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desperate souls aboard them are lost in the ravenous waves. I don't know that anyone here would remember that the M.S. St. Louis, carrying 937 Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany was turned away from our shores in 1939, but most of us are old enough to remember our nation's unwillingness to welcome boat lifts from Cuba and Haiti, the refusal of our military to assist our desperate allies at the fall of Saigon, and, of course, the ongoing cruelty towards Latino families at our southern border. Closer to home, we have even read in the past month of U.S. citizens detained at the border with Canada, simply because their national origin was Iranian.

Of course, this national policy of cruelty is justified by its authors as a means of protecting against "undesirables." Before he attained to our nation's highest office, the current incumbent infamously said, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists..." We know these foul words to be lies. Here with us this morning, we have two beautiful families that we love whom our President would tar with his disgusting brush. I pledge to you this morning, that I will do everything I can to raise the word of truth against these lies, to promote the word of kindness against this cruelty, and to remind our neighbors that we are called to love each other, even if our history is as bitter as the Jews and the Samaritans.

The Maltese showed "uncommon kindness" to Paul, even though he was a prisoner. How can we follow their example? First, we must remember that the U.S. has the highest per capita prison rate in the world and it's not even close. For every 100,000 in population in the U.S., 737 men and women are behind bars. Russia is next at 615, then Ukraine all the way down at 350 per 100,000. Decades of the ineffective, so-called "War on Drugs" is largely responsible but let's not forget that for-profit prison construction and management are big business. In the first sixteen years of this century, incarcerations in private prisons have grown by 47% and that's not including a whopping 442% increase in immigrant detentions – folks who are locked up for their temerity of wanting to live among us. This is far from "uncommon kindness" – this is not even justice.

So, what can we do? What must we do to show "uncommon kindness?" First, we must speak out. We must be sure we have the facts at hand, and we must talk about them with our friends, our neighbors, our children and grandchildren. Do we run the risk of alienating them? Yes, we do, but Jesus warned us that he "(came) to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." Those who turn away from us, we must love, but we must be truthful with them. In addition to speaking out, we must vote for those who come nearest to our own calling in these matters. Notice that I did not say those who agree with us. If we wait for politicians to agree with us in all these matters, we may never vote again. But we should encourage those who draw near to God's love for others and push back against those who preach or practice hate. Finally, depending each of us on our own gifts and abilities, we should seek, as Jesus taught, to visit the prisoners and proclaim liberty to the captives. Prison ministry requires time, ability to travel, and training. But we can also do our part by supporting such efforts to support prisoners as Fabian's Fund, overseen by our sister, Lydia Flora Barlow, ABC-USA missionary to the prisoners. The address for that website, where you can make a donation, is noted at the bottom of your bulletin.

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Listen, I get it, this isn't easy. I'm suggesting that we give sacrificially of our assets of time, energy, and money, and that we risk relationships that matter to us. But as Dr. Amy Oden writes, "If we are not taking any risks in our welcome, it's time to step back and ask whether we are offering the generous welcome that God has offered us." And uncommon kindness to those who need it has its own rewards. Recent research shows that being kind not only makes us feel better but actually improves our health and actually slows the aging process. A study showed that those who focused on being kind to others in a meditation study had slower deterioration of the telomeres that control our aging.

"Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us; teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace." This was our song and our prayer just a few minutes ago. As we close, we will sing and pray together with these words: "...help us bear each other's burdens, breaking down each wall or fence. Words of comfort, words of vision, words of challenge said with care, bring new power and strength for action, make us colleagues, free and fair." We are called, my sisters and my brothers, to "uncommon kindness." May God continue to strengthen us for the journey ahead. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, and Mother of us all, Amen.