

That is the theme Scripture for this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, as selected by the sisters of The Community of Grandchamp, an ecumenical monastic order based in Switzerland. I'll come back to them in a few minutes. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is one of those events on the liturgical calendar that I really look forward to each year; the opportunity for the celebration of the ecumenical spirit. As I think you all know, I was committed to ecumenism, the movement toward bringing Christians together across denominational lines, long before I came here. The trajectory of my life practically demanded it. And since I've been your pastor, with a contractual mandate to "maintain a cooperative relationship with... local ecumenical organizations," I've served as convener for the old South Snohomish County Ministerial Association, as a board member, Treasurer, and President of the Church Council of Greater Seattle, and now as a member of a new, still informal Snohomish County group. The growing unity of the Church, despite our human-made denominational differences, is important to me.

Another reason that I so enjoy the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is the opportunity to learn more about ecumenical work around the world. You may remember that when I took my first Sabbatical leave from my duties here, nearly ten years ago, I spent two weeks with two of the best-known ecumenical communities in Europe; first in Taizé, France, then on the Isle of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. Through the material overseen by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity for each year's Week of Prayer, I've had the opportunity to learn from other champions of ecumenism without leaving my office. Over the years, I've read and passed on to you information about the Church in Ireland, Korea, Scotland, Jerusalem, Poland, India, Canada, Brazil, Latvia, Germany, the Caribbean, Indonesia, and Malta.

Today, I want to share with you some things I've learned about not one, but two ecumenical ministries. The first, already mentioned as the group who discerned this year's theme, is the Monastical Community of Grandchamp. The Sisters of Grandchamp relate their history as follows: "In the 1930s a number of Reformed women from French-speaking Switzerland... rediscovered the importance of silence in listening to the Word of God. At the same time, they revived the practice of spiritual retreats to nourish their life of faith, inspired by the example of Christ who went apart to a lonely place to pray. They were soon joined by others who took part in regularly organized retreats in Grandchamp, a small hamlet near the shores of Lake Neuchatel. It became necessary to provide a permanent presence of prayer and welcome for the growing number of guests and retreatants. Today the community has fifty sisters, all women from different generations, church traditions, countries and continents. In their diversity the sisters are a living parable of communion. They remain faithful to a life of prayer, life in community and the welcoming of guests. The sisters share the grace of their monastic life with visitors and volunteers who go to Grandchamp for a time of retreat, silence, healing or in search of meaning."

It sounds like a lovely place to visit, doesn't it? The Community of Grandchamp welcomed as one of their first visitors, the young Roger Schutz, later known as Brother Roger, the founder of the ecumenical community of the Brothers of Taizé. That visit led to a lasting relationship and in 1953, "the Community of Grandchamp adopted both the Rule of Taizé and the Taizé Office immediately upon its publication." Like the brothers of Taizé, the sisters of Grandchamp focus their work on young people and the poor, sending their sisters to work in poverty-plagued countries such as Algeria, Indonesia, Lebanon, and the Holy Land. They currently have two

retreat houses in Switzerland and one in the Netherlands. In honor of the relationship between Grandchamp and Taizé, we'll sing a familiar Taizé hymn as we close today.

The very existence of this community is moving proof of how the Holy Spirit has worked over the centuries to heal the wounds of division that the Body of Christ has visited upon itself. When we think of Switzerland today, we think of the beauty of the Alpine scenery and of the country's famous neutrality, but in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Switzerland was at the heart of the bloody conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, and between various strains of Protestantism. When we trace the history of our own Baptist Movement back to our Anabaptist forebears, we find that those who espoused adult baptism, usually a "second" baptism for those raised in the Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed traditions, were sentenced by courts of heresy to be drowned in Switzerland's beautiful rivers and lakes, since they liked water so much. For the Sisters of Grandchamp to be champions of ecumenism some four hundred years later is remarkable.

The sisters had this to say about this year's Week of Prayer theme: "Jesus reminds his disciples that he is the vine and we are the branches. If we abide in him, in Jesus and the Covenant made in his precious blood, we will be such a healthy branch as to bear much fruit, abundant grapes. Jesus manifests this in his references to loving one another: 'Abide in my love.' This love of Christ figuratively speaking is akin to the healthy sap that nourishes the vine throughout all its branches. Jesus the man is lovingly begotten into human society by the love God has for all human beings, through the cooperation of a human woman, the Virgin Mary. In return, humanity is repeatedly raised from sin to justification by the love of Christ, the only Son of God, one with the Father and the Spirit through all the ages. This resource for abiding in his love is endless. The image of branches helps believers understand that they are all diverse as individuals, but brought together in the one Vine, who is Christ alive in the Church. It can also point out, in these times of growing ecumenical witness, that the differing expressions of Christian faith are also branches which cannot live on their own and still authentically proclaim the Gospel to all creatures. We preach Christ crucified and risen to a needy world, that the world may have hope. Separately, that 'sap' which keeps all the branches healthy, gets stuck in blocked veins of animosity, distrust, bigotry and ignorance. Only open veins will allow the sap to flow. Only then can all the branches bear much fruit. Therefore, abiding in Christ's love, let us love one another... Human society is reminded that through the struggle of 2020 we are needier for love, fellowship and support than we have been in generations. So, let the sap flow! Let us bear much fruit."

Each year, the community that discerns the theme provides a certain amount of commentary on their choice, but other writers in various nations are also invited to provide commentary on the theme scripture. In the U.S., the editors of the magazine, *Ecumenical Trends*, published by the Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute, which is a ministry of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, invited a young ecumenical worker named Andrew DeCort to provide an essay of commentary. Mr. DeCort has a PhD in Ethics from the University of Chicago and has lectured in ethics, theology, and Ethiopian studies at Wheaton College, the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology, the University of Bonn, and the American Theological Initiative. He and his wife live in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where they head the Institute for Faith and Flourishing and the Neighbor-Love Movement.

If the work of the Community of Grandchamp shows how far Switzerland has come in ecumenical work since the Thirty Years War, the work of the DeCorts in Ethiopia returns us to that time of internecine bloodshed. DeCort writes, “When the editors of Ecumenical Trends invited me to write this essay, I was receiving dozens of death threats. My initiative in Ethiopia called the Neighbor-Love Movement works to promote seeing others as precious neighbors across polarized identities, and some people were not happy about the bridges we were attempting to build. Sadly, many of the most hateful threats came from neighbors who claimed a Christian identity.” Later in his essay, DeCort notes: “In my own context, just last year, Ethiopia had more displaced people than Syria as communities clashed. These communities were overwhelmingly Christian yet divided by ethnic identity. Some thirty-five thousand university students fled their campuses due to conflict and killing. Dozens of churches have been burned down, in some cases by fellow Christians across denominational or ethnic lines. Prime Minister Abiy has recently warned that Ethiopia’s survival is threatened by ‘the ideology of ethno-religious conflict and massacre.’”

I found all of Andrew DeCort’s commentary on our passage for this morning profoundly moving and not simply on account of the courage and faith that he and his wife are showing in promoting the message of Jesus that we must love our neighbor at great risk to themselves. So far, in the United States, we have escaped the Ethiopian experience of thousands of persons displaced and ethno-religious massacre but if we smugly assume that such things cannot happen here, we are fooling ourselves. We can no longer excuse the disappearance of First Nations women, the hunting of Latino immigrants in our southwestern deserts, and the indiscriminate killing of Black women and men as the actions of a few bad apples. The so-called “War on Drugs” has been increasingly revealed as a political strategy to remove Black and Brown men from society to the approval of White voters. And more Black churches have been burned in the last few years than we have seen since the Civil Rights Movement. Too many of these acts of ethnically motivated violence have been applauded or even instigated by those who would claim the banner of Christ. My friends, we cannot ignore the warnings that, unless we change our national course, the United States of America is likely to end in mob violence, injustice, and plutocracy. One presidential election will not stem the tide.

Hear now more of Andrew DeCort’s thoughts on John 15: “When we read the evangelist’s story about Jesus in John 15:1-17, we discover a strikingly similar situation, as well as Jesus’s own answer to this pressing question. In the face of escalating polarization, conflict, and violence, Jesus says, “Abide in my love” (John 15:9). According to Jesus, this practice of abiding, or remaining, has two dimensions: staying vitally connected to Jesus himself and obeying his command to love others even when this means sacrificing what is dear to oneself.” DeCort goes on to remind us that, in times of danger, we look for the structures and beliefs that can sustain our physical and spiritual well-being. We must remember the claim of Jesus that he himself is our Source of Life. As branches of the Vine, we can only stay healthy so long as we are drawing our life force, our life’s pattern, from the life of Jesus. Andrew DeCort testifies: “The Neighbor-Love Movement has witnessed this firsthand in Ethiopia. As we’ve prayed, meditated on Jesus’s words, and encouraged one another, we’ve watched bitter attacks produce in us a deeper gentleness, affection, and longing for peace. We’ve been empowered to respond to curses with blessing, threats with forgiveness, and division with bridge-building. We’ve seen thousands of

Abide in Me

youth and some of Ethiopia's key leaders sign our Covenant and commit to living as Neighbor-Love Ambassadors who love others across boundaries. Hope has pushed through despair with new life."

After warning of the death of the spirit that comes from separation from his own life-giving Spirit, Jesus gives his disciples his new command, which is also to us: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Here, again, Andrew DeCort has a powerful word: "In the face of polarization, conflict, and violence, this is what Jesus commands: undivided, self-giving love. This love is God's fruit and the guide for our action. When we actively root ourselves in the true vine that sources and sustains every atom of reality, radical love grows out of us. And when the grapes of God are crushed, what gushes out is this cherishing of others and an abiding commitment to their wellbeing – not a mirroring of the selfishness, anger, and hatred that crushes."

I confess that I unwittingly led into this sermon last week. I'm often far less organized about such things than you might think but the guidance of the Spirit makes me look smart. In Jesus' word about love, I hope you hear the prefiguration of Dr. King's words on agape love, which I quoted at length last week. In Jesus' word about bearing fruit, I hope you are reminded of last week's emphasis on the fruit of the Spirit, which is why we opened this morning with the song we closed with last Sunday, drawn from Paul's definition of the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians. If we want our lives to be marked with love and peace and joy and the rest, we must abide in the love of Jesus, drawing our spiritual sustenance from him as a branch draws sap from the vine. Our love and peace and joy will not come from the political process, no matter who wins and who loses. Reveling in the divisions afflicting our country will only produce more anger, more hurt, more destruction. We must love one another and to do that, we must turn our eyes to Jesus.

To close this morning, I want to again give place to Andrew DeCort. He writes: "We live in a time of escalating polarization, conflict, and violence. There is much bitterness, division, and fear in and between our communities. Many of us feel vulnerable and uncertain of the future. For some, it seems like the lights have already gone out and that the worst is inevitable.

In this crucial moment, let us, like Jesus, defy the forces within us and around us by pausing, re-centering, and praying.

Let us pray that we would remain in Jesus's love, the true vine, who is the Logos of all creation and the faithful source of all flourishing. Jesus loves us – all of us.

Let us receive his warning and examine the false vines in which we seek our life. Have we mistaken our national or political affiliation, religious institution, economic status, or some other marker of identity for the fruit that we seek? Let us prayerfully bless and surrender these identities to Jesus.

Let us receive afresh his command to love one another – love and not hate, healing and not wounding, hands that wash feet and don't raise themselves in violence.

Abide in Me

And let us welcome Jesus's joy even in the storm of this world as we pray for new community healed in his love.

Remaining in Jesus's love is not a weak piety. It is a counter-cultural statement about the nature of reality itself. If the self-giving love of God embodied in Jesus is the true source and life of all reality, then self-giving love is the only way to flourish and enter into a new future. Being crucified in Jesus's love is more powerful than contempt, conflict, and violence cut off from Jesus.

This love must be the heart of all of our prayer and practice in the world, until Jesus's prayer that we would be one is finally answered in new creation."

My friends, let this be our prayer as we sing and as we move forward in the days and weeks to come. Thanks be to God! Amen.