

“Finding Unity in Our Diversity”

Ephesians 2: 11-22

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We all know the theory. It suggests that in the midst of great diversity, there is unity—that, in the midst of our many differences, there is the great common ground of agreement. In theory, it sounds so good! In theory, it suggests that there is a clear and discernable path forward that leads us to a place where we can all join hands and sing, “Kum Ba Yah.”

In theory. But, in actual practice, it never is that easy.

In actual practice, there are 101 reasons that seem to erode the path and obscure the vision. In actual practice, it seems that we soon set our idealism aside and resort to the familiar entrenched positions that we have adopted—positions that tend to belittle or even demonize those who see matters very differently from the way we see them.

This morning, we may speak about being the “United” States or the “United” Methodist Church in theory, but in actual practice, it seems that we are less and less “united.”

Our differences and our disagreements loom so large that, at times, it seems as if it is impossible to move beyond them. That much is already clear from the Presidential Primary process and the ways in which the issues are being framed for the election this November. Already the battle lines are drawn, not only in terms of red and blue states, but also in terms of the many contentious issues that reside within those states and within both the Democrat and Republican parties. There is not just one “great divide,” but many divides that have fractured our sense of unity.

And what we have observed taking place within the political realm, we can, likewise, observe taking place within our United Methodist Church.

Recently, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church took place in Portland, Oregon. This is a conference that takes place every four years and serves as the ultimate decision making and policy setting authority of the church. The General Conference defines our rule book which is known as the “Book of Discipline.”

As many of you know are aware, the present wording of the Book of Discipline has come under increasing criticism and protest over the past several decades in regards to the church’s stance on the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender persons. Simply put, the Book of Discipline has stipulated that homosexuality is “incompatible” with Christian teaching and that these individuals will not be allowed to be ordained within the church and that clergy will not be allowed to officiate at homosexual unions or weddings.

Given this stance, the debate at General Conference has only intensified over the past several sessions. Silent protests, walk-outs, and angry debate has brought the United Methodist Church to the precipice of a split between the conservative and liberal segments

of the church. This year's session was no exception. Those who insist upon bringing a fundamental change to our Book of Discipline and the choice to include rather than exclude those of a different sexual orientation faced stern opposition from those who insist that the ruling of the Discipline remain the same.

When it was clear that nothing positive was going to come of this decades old confrontation, the Council of Bishops offered a proposal in the hopes of defusing the explosive situation. They proposed that a specially selected task force, representing a broad cross section of the church, be appointed to study the wording in the Book of Discipline in the hope of finding a way forward other than schism.

The proposal was adopted by a fairly close vote. When this group has finished its work, they will make a recommendation to be presented at what likely will be a specially called session of the General Conference. This is where we are in this present moment of time as we await further insight, inspiration and direction. It is, of course, an uncertain place to be, one that is a bit precarious to say the least. But the good news is that we now have the opportunity to step back and think and pray and work together in order to find genuine ways of building trust and understanding within the church that we love.

Some may say that this is merely wishful thinking and not grounded in reality. It may be. But it may also be that place of human vulnerability that the Holy Spirit needs in order to penetrate the layers of our defenses that we often use to shield ourselves from the need to change.

So often, it seems, our first inclination as human beings is not to look within, but to focus our attention upon others and what they are doing or not doing. As Jesus suggested, we find it rather easy to fix our attention on the speck in our neighbor's eye, while failing to notice the log in our own eye. It is this mindset of judgment and absolute religious certainty that set the table for the crusades and the holy wars that have been fought over the centuries. It is this mindset that has led not only exclusion and persecution, but also to the illusion that this is what it means to be faithful to the Good News of Jesus Christ. And it is this mindset, I believe, that threatens the future of our Church.

In our lesson from Ephesians this morning, the writer reminds his listeners that while there were certainly differences between Jews and Gentiles, the wall of those differences had been broken down, once and for all, in Jesus Christ. He came to proclaim peace to those who were near and those who were far off. In Christ, the cornerstone, says the writer, **"the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord."**

It is then, in the reconciling witness of Jesus that we find our inspiration for finding the common ground of unity and understanding. He is the one who has broken down the dividing wall in both our past and our present. As we seek the wisdom and insight needed to find that common ground, we can do no better than to rely upon his witness.

With this understanding providing the backdrop, I would like to briefly examine one of the fundamental problems that we face—namely the assumptions that we are often inclined to make when it comes to our understanding of those loaded words, “liberal and conservative.”

So often, it seems, we are inclined to see our differences in either/ or, black or white terms. All liberals think this way and act that way. All conservatives believe this and do that. There is no in-between, no mixture of liberal and conservative thought or action. Your state is either red or its blue...not purple. It’s one way or the other. End of discussion.

But in reality, that might prove to be only the beginning of the discussion. The fact is that most all of us have a blend of liberal and conservative thought. We may be liberal about some matters—certain social issues, for example—and conservative about other matters, such as finances or certain traditions. Part of the solution to our current impasse, I believe, can be found in the recognition that labels are often dangerous and deceiving. They tend to pigeonhole people and make certain assumptions about them that fail to see or understand the subtle nuances of their perspective.

A first step toward forging a better understanding and a more cohesive United Methodist Church would be to resist generalized labels and categories and insist upon paying attention—that is, to truly listen to—those with whom we have disagreement.

This, of course, will not guarantee a breakthrough in understanding and an immediate solution to the problem, but it can help to forge a relationship of trust that grows out of the experience of being listened to and heard. When that happens, a foundation has been poured that can be used to build upon.

This work of truly listening to the other is indeed, foundational to all that follows, but what does follow requires far more than merely a willingness to listen and to understand. It requires a willingness to be as flexible enough to “try on” the other’s point of view and to look for points and places of agreement—even if they seem small or insignificant at the time. That, as you might imagine, is hard work. It can be emotionally challenging and spiritually frustrating. It often is when others simply do not see things from our point of view.

But if we truly seek to find unity in the midst of our great diversity as a church, it will be a necessary path. Our differences are not just theological in nature, they are also cultural in nature. Not only are we experiencing cultural differences within the different regions of the United States (i.e., the West and the Southeast), but we are also experiencing national cultural differences with, for example, the African Methodist Churches. And those differences can be especially challenging. We must take the time to listen and to learn from the other even if it doesn’t ultimately resolve our differences.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, lived in a time of tension within the Church of England. As a way of addressing and responding to that tension over the issues that divided them, Wesley was fond of quoting the wisdom of St. Augustine who wrote:

In ESSENTIALS, unity;

In NON-ESSENTIALS, liberty;

In ALL THINGS, charity.

That is, I think, a pretty good mantra to follow. One of the strengths of United Methodism has been, I think, our willingness to think and let think when it comes to some of “non-essential” matters of belief. We have never been a people or a church that has insisted on defining God or Jesus of the Holy Spirit in narrow or provincial terms. And that has allowed us to cultivate the sense of openness and inclusiveness as a church that is one of our great trademarks as a faith community.

We have, likewise, tried to practice a certain sense of **charity** in respect to, at least, some of the differences we hold. There is not theological litmus test that one must pass in order to be a United Methodist. Rather, there is a sense of grace and charity (love) that calls for us to be more open and inclusive than we might otherwise be. **“In all things, charity.”**

It’s the third of these three statements, however, that poses the greatest challenge: **“In essentials, unity.”** Can we even agree upon what the essentials of faith really are? And how can we find unity when our ways of working with and interpreting scripture can be so very different? Is it even possible to find an underlying sense of unity that will sustain us and keep us together as a church?

To be honest, I don’t know. I hope and I pray that we will be able to do that. I hope and I pray that the task force appointed by the Bishops can map out a thoughtful way forward—a way that invites us to express and experience **“unity even without unanimity”** as Bishop Ough, the President of the Council of Bishops, put it. I pray that we, as the United Methodist Church, broken and bruised as we are, can find, in our weakness, the strength, the wisdom and the grace to be a Church that welcomes and includes all, without qualification or reservation. For that is, I believe without question, what Jesus would do and what Jesus would have us do.

Is this just an idle dream? Perhaps. But it is, I believe, a dream worth the dreaming, a dream worth working for, a dream that is worth our willingness to listen, to reflect, and to be open to new ways of thinking and living. And perhaps, in ways unknown and yet to be imagined, God’s Spirit will move and our eyes and our hearts will be opened and we will be the Church that God is calling us to be.

May it be so? Amen!