

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
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What Does the Lord Require of You?

We have gathered together this evening to praise and to worship our great God and to reflect for a few moments on the text of Micah 6, which has been chosen as the text for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In particular, we have been invited to reflect on the question from this text, “What does God require of us?”

We know the answer that the Lord gave to Micah regarding this question. It included three points. “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” This simple triad of expectations for God’s people, set forth a way of living. It seems to embody the Great Commandment to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. Loving the Lord as well as our neighbor still requires justice, kindness, and humility.

But, you might ask, ‘How might this question relate to the unity of the One People of God? As we think about those who have gathered this evening

- to celebrate *together* God’s call upon us as God’s people,
- to reflect upon the progress we have made in living out the prayer of Jesus that we would all be one, and
- to enjoy the fellowship made possible by God’s Holy Spirit indwelling us and empowering us to do God’s work,

it should be evident to us that some things have been left undone. Somewhere along the way, we have forgotten what it means to be just, kind, and humble in our dealings with one another.

In spite of the Apostle’s exhortation in Ephesians 4:3 for us to make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” we have failed to do so. We live divided - East from West, North from South. We are separated Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant, ancient and new, traditional and emerging, institutional and independent. And we tend to identify more with what divides us than with what unites us. Just think about the names that we give our various denominations

- Baptists highlight their use of water.
- Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians what us to know how they are governed.
- Methodists point us back to the methods John Wesley used to help people achieve the “holy life”.
- Pentecostals are all about power.
- Catholics are concerned to educate us about the presence of the local church in the universal church, and the universal church present in every local congregation.
- While the Orthodox believe that they are the ones who know best how rightly to give glory to God.

These names say much about what we value.

While we are long on emphasizing our differences, we are short on imagination when it comes to living out our unity. Memories of past rebukes and perceived slights, of unfair or ill-informed judgments, of arrogant and unilateral decisions, of unshared visions and self-serving actions are all too fresh and still quite influential among us. Some are still quite painful. But *our memories* are not always reliable when it comes to the facts, nor are our histories always consistent with the *memories of others*. We have developed our own ways of thinking and our own ways of acting in isolation from one another, as though that were the way it has always been or that is the way that it will always be. We have failed to take seriously any sense of developing a common mind, and hence, a common will among us. It is difficult for us to imagine our way into a more cohesive future. So we tend to give up and go our separate ways. Even the most ecumenical among us typically take their primary Christian identity from their church or their denomination.

This “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” suggests that much more is possible between us than what we typically think or the way we usually act. So this evening, we are being asked to reflect upon the question that the Lord posed to Israel through the prophet Micah. What does the Lord require *of us?* – You and me, my church and your church, as we turn our attention to the question of our unity as the People of God.

Throughout much of the Church around the world this past Sunday, the Gospel reading was the beautiful pericope outlining events at the wedding at Cana. It was there that Jesus performed His first sign by turning water into wine. When the servants asked Mary, the mother of our Lord, what to do now that the wine for the wedding was gone, she didn’t hesitate. She took them straight to Jesus and instructed them, “Do whatever He tells you”.

This sort of response was not new to her. She was not simply being a proud Jewish mother. She recognized something in her Son that she had recognized in the announcement of Gabriel when he told her that she would be with child. She listened to that announcement and then she responded, “Let it be according to your word.” In spite of her questions, Mary provides a wonderful example of what it means to be obedient to God’s will. In this case, she must have captured the significance of the moment and the role that Jesus would soon play in doing the work of the Father. So she pointed the servants to Jesus with the simple command, “Do whatever He tells you.”

The reading from the epistles this past Sunday was taken from 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, a very familiar text to Pentecostals like me. In that text, the Apostle informed the Corinthians that the Holy Spirit sovereignly distributes a variety of charisms, and then activates them so that the faithful may use them for “the common good”. When we read this passage, it is clear that from the beginning, there has been diversity within the Church, diversity that stems from the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit. That diversity is present within each congregation. That diversity also exists within the whole Church. And yet, even as the Apostle recognizes and notes the role of the Holy Spirit in engendering that diversity by the distribution of the various charisms or gifts to whomever the Spirit wills, he also notes that there is unity. We are one Body of Christ, and we are all members of that one Body. While the Apostle points out the various members that make up that Body, he makes it very clear that this one Body comes under the headship of Jesus Christ. Thus, even in Scripture, the Church manifests both unity and diversity.

For a moment, let us put these thoughts together and turn our attention to the question of Christian unity. What does the Lord require of us? Mary points us to Jesus and tells us to do whatever He tells us to do. What is our Lord Jesus Christ saying to us about the unity of His Church? Are we doing whatever the Lord asks of us? Do we love one another as He commanded us to do? How may we use our God-given gifts for the “common good,” that is to say, for the sake of the whole of Christ’s Church? What does the Lord require of us?

I believe quite firmly that answers to these questions are available, although we have not yet found them. Either we have not dug deeply enough or we have not yet been sufficiently imaginative of the possibilities by which the Holy Spirit may lead us into a more united future. But our third text this evening tells us that God “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine....”

More than all we can ask or imagine!

Imagination is a powerful tool. It is right up there with things like dreams and visions. It is these things that enable us to set goals for the future. Imagination. Dreams and Visions. Two days ago President Obama was inaugurated for his second term as the leader of our nation. Two days ago we also celebrated the life and ministry of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Many of us have read or heard his famous “I Have a Dream” speech given 50 years ago, this year. What is so very significant about that speech is that Dr. King shared his dream with little more than four simple, well-chosen words which he repeated with a cadence that carried his audience forward through a series of word pictures. He then wove those pictures together into a larger dream. He spoke of children who would one day be known for their character rather than the color of their skin, and little black boys and little black girls and little white boys and little white girls sitting down together and holding hands because they are “brothers and sisters”. Dr. King imagined what at that time was an imaginary society, one in which *everyone* regardless of background would be given an equal opportunity to become all that the Lord had intended for them to become. And Dr. King invited us into that dream. He asked us to imagine with him, what that society might be like. And he invited us to share in carrying out that dream – to do justice, to act with kindness, and to walk humbly before our God.

Fifty years down the road that dream is not yet fulfilled. But its fulfillment has come a long way, because most Americans have united themselves with one another to see that Dr. King’s dream moves from the realm of his imagination, from the realm of the abstract, to the realm of our lived reality. His dream is not yet fulfilled, but it is far closer to being fulfilled today, than anyone else might have imagined possible in 1963. That is the power of imagination, of dreams, and of visions. The prophet Joel foretold a time when God’s people would receive visions and dreams. And this, I believe, is that time!

As we look at the Church around the world, there is no question that it needs to embrace a clear vision once again of who it is. Who is the Church? It is the diverse people of God. We are a numberless people who come from every nation, representing all tribes, and peoples, and languages. God must love our diversity because God’s creation is full of it. Again, we ask, “Who is the Church?” We are the One Body of Christ, indwelt and empowered through the One

Holy Spirit and subject to the direction of our One Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. How are we supposed to be living? We are to be just in our actions, kind in our deeds, and humble in our accomplishments. We are to love one another even as Christ loved us.

I am an ordained minister of the Gospel by calling, a Church historian by training, and a teacher and ecumenist by vocation. As I survey our common history, I am often dismayed, sometimes depressed, but every once in a while, greatly encouraged - like tonight. The One Church of Jesus Christ has been riddled by self-serving claims and actions from its beginning. Even in the New Testament, we saw factions in Corinth, disputes in Philippi; schisms in Galatia, and heresy had raised its head among those in Asia Minor to whom John wrote. As I survey our common history, I realize that these same issues have continued to appear throughout our entire history. All of them are still with us today.

There seems to be a difference, however, between the Church as it was represented in the New Testament and the Church in which we participate today. As I read the New Testament, I find discord and disunity, but I also find a deep commitment to maintain or preserve the unity of this One Church. Yes, arguments ran deeply between them, feelings were undoubtedly strong, but those who led the Church were willing to go to extraordinary lengths to stay together. Through the centuries, however, we seem to have lost that will to stay together. We may gather once each year to talk about our unity. We may belong to organizations and councils that take some actions toward doing things together. But on the whole, we celebrate our independent existence as churches, denominations, and even independent ministries.

We have all grown up in a time when denominations have existed and we have canonized the status quo, with its differing denominations as though that were normal. We have forgotten that for a thousand years there was essentially only one church, and for another 500 years, only eastern and western manifestations of that Church. Then came the Reformation. Here in the United States, the strong emphasis upon individualism, the challenges that immigration brought to us from our beginning, challenges based upon different languages and cultures and practices, and the various theological traditions present throughout Europe gave birth to hundreds of denominations, large and small.

As an ecumenist I think a great deal about how things were, how things are, and how they might be in the future. It seems to me that some folks have given up on any form of visible unity among the People of God. To them the thought is overwhelming. It is an impossible task! Even if it is not impossible, they often view it as undesirable. They have either lost or have never had a commitment to a common mind. They seem no longer able to dream. They do not trust others who claim the name of Christ. Among such folk, there is little room for diversity and no room for unity larger than themselves. But in taking such a position, they are neither just, nor kind, nor humble.

There are also other folks who seem to suggest that visible Christian unity must look exactly like their own Church does. It can be no other way. They are not really open to hearing ideas offered by others. They will not consider any suggestions, let alone open themselves up to possible change. If visible unity comes, it must be on their terms alone. Among such folk, pride, power, and protectionism seem to guard against any real movement toward visible unity. Such a

position discounts millions of Christians as though they have neither meaning nor value. And in taking such a position, they are neither just, nor kind, nor humble.

There are still other folk who seem to have given up on the tension between truth and community. Some seem to think that one must give up the “truth” in order to have a broader community, while others willingly give up community in order to safeguard the truth. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, the recently retired General Secretary of the National Council of Churches has noted that both truth *and* community are essential if we are to live out the Gospel as we have been called to do it.¹

On the one hand, when we take a position that we label as “truth” but willingly discount much of the rest of the Christian community, we fail to understand the nature of both truth and community. We move into the realm of rigidity and ultimately into an untenable form of fundamentalism.

On the other hand, when we take a position that we label as “truth” but knowingly violate much of the rest of the Christian community, we again fail to understand the nature of both truth and community. We move into the realm of relativity and ultimately into irrelevance. In this way we fail to understand justice, kindness, and humility. In the end, the truth is found in Jesus Christ. In the end, community comes through the Spirit of Christ, who has made us one. And these two things go together, even as we proclaim together the Triune God.

In the end, our genuine concern for the entire Household of God cannot continue to give our assent to the sectarian mindset that arises from the denominationalism that we have come to view as both normal and normative within the Church of the twenty-first century. As Christians, we all understand that God has revealed Himself to us in a unique and salvific way in Christ Jesus. He is “the way, and the truth, and the life”. As followers of Jesus Christ, all of us within our various denominations are still viewed by people from the different religions of this world and by no religion at all, as representatives of Christ. We are Christians. We practice One faith – the Christian faith. Our unity is declared each time we speak in Christ’s Name. But when these same people look at us more closely, the quarrels between us appear as both parochial and relatively unimportant. Is that how we want to be known, as petty, parochial, sectarians?

Over fifty years ago Lesslie Newbigen, Bishop of the Church of South India, argued in his book, *Is Christ Divided?*, that

The disunity of the Church is a denial of the promise and a contradiction of the purpose for which the Church is sent into the world. How can the church give to the world the message that Jesus is able to draw all [humankind] to Himself, while it continues to say, “Nevertheless, Jesus is not able to draw us who bear His name together”? How will the world believe a message which we do not appear

¹ Michael Kinnamon, *Truth and Community: Diversity and Its Limits in the Ecumenical Movement* Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Press/Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988.

to believe ourselves? The divisions of the Church are a public denial of the sufficiency of the atonement.²

This last sentence states it quite explicitly. The divisions that currently mark the Church deny the very power of Christ and His sacrifice for us to change the way that we relate to one another. Our divisions, therefore, are a scandal to all that the Gospel represents. Our divisions make it easy for others to dismiss us and our claims.

Bishop Newbigin often spoke of the challenge that many non-Christians posed to him when he presented the Gospel to them. They stumbled over the deep divisions in India's history that separated Christians from Christians, as the Catholic Portuguese were supplanted by the Reformed Dutch and the Reformed Dutch were displaced by the Anglican and then the Baptist, Congregationalist, and Methodist English, divisions that seemed to deny the efficacy of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. When Bishop Newbigin spoke of Christ's power to reconcile humanity to God, and Christ's ability to reconcile people one with another, their response was often marked by skepticism.

Yes, that is what you say, but it is not what you believe. For if you believed it, you would yourselves have found it true. You would have found in Jesus a center of unity deep enough and strong enough to overcome your natural divisions and to bring you together as one family. If you really believed that the Name of Jesus is the one name under which all [hu]mankind is to be enrolled, you would yourselves have found that Name sufficient. But in fact you add all sorts of other names. Evidently you yourselves do not find in Him the secret that you are offering to us.³

If any headway is to be made on this very difficult, indeed, this scandalous problem,

- the kind of disunity with which we have chosen to live,
- the kind of disunity that we highlight with our independent mindsets and denominational distinctives,
- the kind of disunity that draws people to our church and away from others,
- the kind of disunity that we celebrate in our separate names,

then we do not demonstrate that we know very much about justice or kindness or humility.

There are many things that we can do to bring about changes that reflect the kind of unity for which Jesus prayed. It would be dishonest if we did not admit right up front that we all too often speak disparagingly about one another. One very simple suggestion would be that we agree not to call one another names, or label one another with slurs of any kind. When we do not respect one another, when we speak evil of one another or simply dismiss one another without attempting to resolve our differences, when we belittle one another, we do not do justice to the vision of unity that Jesus had for His followers.

² Lesslie, Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided? A Plea for Christian Unity in a Revolutionary Age*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), 9.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *Is Christ Divided?* 21-22.

A second simple suggestion would be to include other congregations by name in our pastoral prayers. As we begin to pray for them, our attitudes toward them begin to change as well. Our commitment toward unity, requires that we pray for the other in such a way that their needs become our own. We begin to care that their needs are met. We join with them in pursuing the will of God for all of us.

It is also the case that genuine unity is built upon solid relationships. A third suggestion, then, would be for all of us to reach out to other Christians who are different from us and develop relationships that can lead to changes in the status quo. Strong relationships help us better to understand and love the other. We become much more concerned about their welfare than we were before. Genuine relationships require that we be concerned about considering the hurt that we inflict upon our sisters and brothers when we charge ahead with unilateral actions. It is this type of thinking that is the beginning of real Christian unity. Solid relationships with one another issue in actions of justice, kindness, and humility follow in abundance.

There are many other suggestions that could be made that go a long way in our work for greater cooperation and unity. Perhaps an important next step is to open ourselves up to a greater use of our God-given imaginations. The reading from Ephesians noted that *“by the power at work within us”* God *“is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine....”* It strikes me that we have not yet found the answer to greater Christian unity because **our** imaginations are still too small.

If we are not yet able to imagine a future together,

- a future in which unbelievers are astonished by our actions as they were in Tertullian’s day and remark, “Look at how they love one another”,
- a future in which we do not call one another names,
- a future in which we do not bear false witness against one another,
- a future in which we do not mistreat one another,
- a future in which we place the concerns of others ahead of our own,
- a future in which we love one another as Christ has loved us,
- a future in which all that we do may be measured positively as just, kind, and humble,

then perhaps we should ask that God grant us the ability to embrace a richer, more robust, and fuller imagination for His Church and its unity.

He is at work in us already. That is what has brought us to this place. God stands ready, here and now, to *“accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine”* even as we seek ways to manifest more clearly the unity that we already share in Christ Jesus. May His Name be praised and glorified even as we seek to “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with [our] God.”