

In addition to this past week being Inauguration week for our country's new President, this week, the third week of January, has for over a hundred years, been observed as a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.<sup>1</sup> In John's Gospel, Jesus prayed that his disciples *be one* so that the world might believe,<sup>2</sup> and so, as a way to embody that prayer, the many different Christian denominations gather together, to pray together, temporarily setting aside theological difference and disagreement.

This is nice, for sure, and perhaps even important in some ways, but do any of us even remotely believe that the church of today, in any of its expressions, actually lives in such a way that "the world might believe." Despite Jesus' prayer for our unity, Christians of today (in general) are largely indistinguishable in speech and action from the world at large.

In my very first sermon here at St. Ben's I came with some questions about who we understand ourselves to be, as Christians, as Church, and as a parish. I said I reckoned that when we're up and out at the most general level we might answer with confidence, together, that as Christians we're followers of Jesus, but it's likely, when we drill down into the nubbins of what that means, how being a follower of Jesus is experienced, how it's *lived*, we'd soon find we have our differences, that there are things about being Christian we'll disagree about. We'll see things differently, because we experience the world differently, because we've been shaped by the world differently.

In this life, difference just 'is' – our difference is the stuff of our own life stories, our highly complex biology, the many accidents of our birth, like the places and people and significant events that we each have encountered along the way. It's inevitable that there be many different ways to think and be in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> In the northern hemisphere.

<sup>2</sup> John 17:21

And so it's super important we remember that unity, being one in Christ, is not about us being the same, thinking and living in the same way, because our differences are an unavoidable fact of life.

Our Christian faith does not seek to erase our differences, instead it offers us a Way, a way to live knowing that difference is and always will be.

As followers of Jesus, *together*, the way we respond to our differences matters, especially the most seemingly intractable differences between us, differences of worldview, of lifestyle, or of politics; as Christians, grounded (as we are) in the long view of eternal life, and motivated (as we are) always for justice and by love, oriented to God and believing in the power of the Spirit, our call is to live from the truth of our 'unity' – to be lead in thought and deed, by a deep awareness of our essential one-ness.

But this is really hard.

By contrast, it's super easy to get swept up in the energy of the moment, of the world we live in, it's super easy and quite satisfying to get caught up in the energy that would have us actively separate, put distance – that we might feel is absolutely justifiable – put distance between what we consider right and good ("us"), and that which we have judged to be wrong and bad ("them").

Yet, in our reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul teaches, just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

As Christians, we hold that we, the many members, are the one body of Christ in this world. And, if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; and if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. We are in this together, like it or not, this is our truth.

Jesus prayed that his disciples, that *we*, might be one, and we repeat words of one-ness a number of times, each Sunday, in this liturgy. These words are for us, to help us remember this truth, and, by repeating them each week, to conform our lives to that remembering, especially when we consider leaping into the highly opinionated turmoil of a hot, current moment in the world.

We'll not ever transform this world by our judgement of it, or by expecting to be able to change it by will or by force, by trying to control the thoughts and behavior of others with our opinions or beliefs, however well-worded, or by shouting it down into submission. Transformation of the world depends instead on the transformation of us, our hearts and minds, our lives, and we can only take that on for ourselves. And it can be hard to trust that's true, it can be hard to trust in the awesome power of God's grace if we're not attuned to its presence.

We all share a single source of life, take our breath from the same atmosphere, all of us longing for safety and belonging, a meaningful life, and a sense of purpose. Seeing only our differences and forgetting all that we fundamentally have in common, keeps us trapped in a cycle of ongoing violences towards one another that limits our own lives and own selves, just as it inevitably impacts the lives of those we consider ourselves to be different and separate from.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” The body is one, we are one. Jesus calls us, I believe, to stay ever mindful that this is our reality, this is the truth to which we should/must conform our thinking, our speaking, and our doing. And once we do that, once we commit to living, and responding to the world around us, and the people in it, from this understanding, then and only then will we begin to embody the life-giving promise of what it is to be Beloved Community, to know and show fullness of life ... and, then, and perhaps only then, the world might believe.

There is a great deal of work to be done to make this world a just and safe place for all, folks we love and live alongside are living in fear today, way too many people are struggling to survive in a world which has more than enough for us all. Wars rage on, there is so much violence. In the face of all this staying mindful of our one-ness hardly feels like enough. Staying always mindful of our essential one-ness isn't though a dodge of this work, an abstract thought experiment, it is our truth, and our essential starting point. And it's hard. But if we don't start from here, act in the world from here, we can and do unwittingly participate in, and perpetuate, the systems and cycles of harm we all so desperately want to dismantle and bring to an end.

I want to close with the words of retired Bishop Steven Charleston, member of the Choctaw nation and formerly of the Diocese of Alaska, he posted this to Facebook this week:

“Shock and awe is a military tactic. Comfort and awe is a spiritual alternative. The military option supports the will to dominate. The spiritual option supports the commitment to liberate. We share with all people an awesome grace: the path to peace, on the walk of truth and reconciliation, with justice lived for the sake of all creation. We do not seek control, but something much more transformational and enduring. We seek kinship.”

Amen!