

“An Ecumenical Celebration of the Word”

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St. Peter, MN - January 30, 2011

Acts 2:42-47, Matthew 5:21-26, and Isaiah 58:6-10.

Today's reading from Acts describes the first post-Pentecost community of believers. It says that they 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' They held all things in common. They spent much time together in the temple. They "ate food with glad and generous hearts, praising God." This is a portrait of Christian community and of Christian unity. We know from elsewhere in the New Testament that this unity did not imply sameness. Tensions and disagreements surfaced frequently. The community was in uncharted territory. They needed to figure out exactly what the arrival of Jesus, his life, his death, his resurrection meant for their Jewish identity. They needed to assess Paul's belief that the new covenant was vastly expanded to include all peoples, even non-Jews. What did they think of the Roman Empire—should they tolerate it, cooperate with it, or oppose it? And what would they do in 70 AD once the Temple had been destroyed and the leaders of the Jesus community scattered? There were no uniform answers to these and other questions. So they enjoyed unity without uniformity.

Throughout the centuries, tensions and disagreements have produced disunity. The body has been fractured and, just like humpty dumpty, it's very hard to put it back together again. So, in our day, we need to ask, what is it that makes for unity?

The first answer, I would suggest, is found in the text itself. Those early believers, we've already seen, devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. These are things already practiced by our churches. We all study the apostles' teachings found in the Bible. We all meet together and eat together, and we all say prayers. In one sense, these are enough. But for them to be enough we need also to think and to act differently.

My second suggestion regarding what makes for unity is to listen to each other, to learn how other groups of believers understand the Christian message and their response to it. Here's where we've come a long ways in the last 60 years. I'm old enough to have lived through much of this history. Though the beginnings of the ecumenical movement are usually traced to 1910, it did not get traction until after WWII. The experience of dealing with a totalitarian regime and the pain all European denominations felt as they admitted they had not done enough led to the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and, under the leadership of Pope John XXIII helped to transform Protestant-Roman Catholic relations.

I grew up in a religiously homogenous community and attended equally homogenous schools. Ethnic differences served to reinforce denominational differences. Children were sometimes not allowed to enter the sanctuaries of another denomination. Youth were warned to avoid inter-faith marriage and occasionally even disowned by their families if they violated this warning. Denominational identities were defined in terms of what they were *not*. Lutherans, for example, might not know anything about their own heritage, but they were sure they were "not Catholics."

The first serious ecumenical conversation that I recall was in 1962. Having graduated from college that spring, in August I headed to Michigan for my first conference of Danforth Fellows. Vatican II was about to begin,

and a group of graduate students sat around discussing their hopes for that council. A few of the things that were said astonished me, and I remember going to talk with the discussion leader afterwards. It was an exciting and challenging moment. I learned something new about the other and came away with new questions. I vividly recall the excitement in the room in 1964-5 as nuns and priests and Protestant pastors gathered at Catholic U to listen to Jaroslav Pelikan. Though people were eager to hear him, the excitement had to do with the opportunity to gather together. The 1960s were an exciting time of mutual discovery.

After centuries of division, one step on the way to unity is to learn about each other and to talk together. We should give thanks for how much has been accomplished in the past six decades as many inherited misunderstandings have been overcome and significant new relationships have been forged. We are all richer for it. But the task is unfinished. The need for such listening, learning, and conversing will never end, any more than the need to keep the lines of communication open with a close friend ever ends. The early stages were exciting, but, just as the excitement of a new romance, which seems to blossom without any effort, grows into a committed relationship that requires tending and care to survive, so Christian unity needs more.

This brings us to suggestion #3—Christian unity requires a willingness to forgive and be reconciled. The road to Christian unity is not to believe less deeply, or to be less passionate, or to be indifferent. To be Christian is to stand for something. Given human nature, deeply-held differences will inevitably lead someone to feel insulted or left out or rejected. So, reconciliation is needed. Its importance comes through clearly in the Matthew reading, where Jesus tells his followers to leave their gift at the altar and seek reconciliation with the person who “has something against you.” And it comes through in its warning not to be angry with or to insult a brother or sister. The Christian community is held together by reconciliation, and so long as humans are humans, the willingness to be reconciled is indispensable. As important as polite mixers and mutual discovery can be, this something more is needed for unity.

My fourth suggestion is closely related to the third. It is a deep awareness of the mystery of God. As Jack Haught, a Roman Catholic theologian from whom I have learned much, has observed, there is a difference between a mystery and a problem. I might not know the answer to a problem, but an answer is possible, and once I know the answer the problem will disappear. But a mystery does not disappear. In fact, the more I know, the deeper the mystery. For example, if it were possible for a person to know all there is to know about human reproduction and obstetrics, that person would still find the birth of one’s own child to be a mystery. A new living person has somehow entered the world. The more a person knows about the world, the deeper the mystery of life. And this is even truer with regard to comprehending God

What we find in the Bible are glimpses of God—important glimpses that give us a sense of God’s character, God’s purpose, and God’s attitude toward us, but glimpses that do not answer all our questions. Again and again we are reminded that God’s ways are not our ways, that we see through a glass darkly, that we cannot see God face to face and live. All that we learn from revelation does not make the mystery disappear. However, despite this, time and again religious folks have been lulled into thinking they know more about God than is appropriate. Believers who care about correct teachings have insisted they know what those teachings are and have excluded those who disagree. Believers who care deeply about morality have insisted they know what should be done and excluded those who have questions about the priorities. Believers who prize evangelism have made claims that exclude and demean those whose experience has led them to a different place. And believers who prize the Bible have too often insisted that it has an answer to every question. In their eagerness to

defend the Bible, they have seriously distorted its character and purpose. Every one of these developments divides; every one is a threat to unity.

A deep awareness of the mystery of God makes us more cautious about our claims to know. It's not that we are in the dark. We do know about the steadfast love of God. We do know how God's faithfulness becomes costly love. We do know what God wants for the world—wholeness and peace and justice where the lion lies down with the lamb, where swords are made into plowshares and spears into pruning hoods, where people can sit in the shade of the trees they have planted, where there is food and water and medicine for all, where God is so close at hand that no temple is needed. But we do not know why the world is made in such a way that there is suffering. We do not know when Christ will come again. And some of what we are told is deeply perplexing. Who would have thought that the only way we can really have love is to also experience pain? Who would have thought that God's love for us would entail his own pain? Who would have thought that a called community—whether the ancient Israelites or the church—would make so many poor decisions, especially in circumstances when it has been afraid? Not only must we live into the deep mystery of God but we must also live into the mystery of humans and the limitations on our knowing. Only then can we celebrate the gifts that others bring to the table. Only then can we see our specific faith community as the toe or the knee or the elbow rather than the whole of the body of Christ. And only then will we be ready for unity.

If I may be permitted to come at this in a different way, a deep sense of the mystery of God puts a new emphasis on questions. I'm uncomfortable whenever anyone says that religion supplies answers, because it seems more accurate to say that faith gives us new questions. What does my neighbor need? How do I find the moral courage to stand up for what's right in the face of social pressures that make it easier not to? What am I doing that gets in the way of peace? Without faith, we don't need to ask those questions. Recall how in response to the lawyer who asks Jesus who is his neighbor Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan and then asks him a different question. "Which of these three ... was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" For the lawyer, to ask this question was to see himself and the world differently. And the parable recommends that we should ask it as well. Biblical faith does not give us answers so much as it redirects our questions.

And then it gives us the security of a relationship of grace so that we can live with them. A year or two ago a former student wrote to me. He said I'm sure you don't remember me. (He was right, I didn't.) But I took your holocaust course twenty years ago, and I want you to know that for all these twenty years I have lived with the questions raised by that class, and as a result of pondering them, I am now changing my vocation. In Elie Wiesel's memoir, *Night*, he says that Moshe "liked to say" that "man comes closer to God through the questions he asks Him." When Elie asks him, "Why do you pray?" Moshe responds, "I pray to the God within me for the strength to ask Him the real questions."

Christian unity depends on a willingness to seek the real questions and to live with those questions. Not only does our proclivity to think we have answers divide us, but it also undermines our witness and our pastoral care. All one has to do is to read the letters to Ann Landers to know that at a time of grieving offering superficial answers is worse than having none. And countless thoughtful people I know have drifted away from one church or another simply because the church was not comfortable with their questions. It was so anxious to provide answers that it offered unsatisfactory ones, and the inquirer became an outsider.

What I have been saying is that another ingredient for unity is a deep awareness of the mystery of God and a corresponding willingness to live with unanswered questions. These undergird our need for reconciliation and our need to explore and understand our differences.

My fifth suggestion is that unity arises when the eyes of believers are clearly fixed on a purpose that reaches beyond themselves. The church is not the goal; it is a means; it is called to change the world—to mend and heal the world. Here's where the Isaiah text comes in, with its reminder that fasting, as helpful as it may be, is not an end in itself. "Is not this the fast that I choose," says God, "to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free? Is it [the desired fasting] not to share your bread with the hungry" and to cover the naked when you see them? Worship is important, but it is not an end in itself—our calling is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger (even the stranger who has crossed our borders), to free the oppressed, and to establish justice in the land. So long as our arguments are about how to pray or how to order a worship service or what kind of music to use or who should preside, we won't find unity, but if our attention is drawn outside ourselves to the refugee fearfully awaiting permission to stay, to the starving child, to the homeless teenager, to the adults whose lives are empty of meaning, to the tortured, the abused, and the fearful—unless our eyes are open to the deep needs of the world and our ears open to hear the call to respond, we will not know Christian unity.

The initial excitement of discovery is over and we are in a new stage in ecumenical relations. Today we are being called to join forces in a shared undertaking to foster shalom and to mend the world. This is a huge task. It requires that individuals be transformed by the gospel and societies be transformed by justice-serving love. It requires every skill we have to offer. Indeed, it requires multiple skills and multiple agendas. So long as our attention is directed outward, our diversity is an asset, not a problem. When our attention is directed outward, we can see and appreciate how all these gifts fit together into a larger whole.

The post-Pentecost believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They did this out of gratitude to God. They did this with a deep awareness of their diversity as well as their unity, and they did this for the sake of the world that God loves so deeply—a world then and now in desperate need of mending. To this we are also called, and for this we pray...