

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving Holy God, we come to your house from different paths, from different houses, different backgrounds, different preferences, different focuses, different passions, different families, different stories, but when we come into your house, it is not those differences that define us. It is all that brings us together. We are made one through Christ's flesh; through his ministry, the dividing walls between us have been broken down. The dividing lines we see today are only our creation; the truth is there is only one in Christ. Gracious God, may our lives show the unity in which Christ came to proclaim, the love which he gave his life for, the grace which sets all people free. In this spirit of Christian Unity, we pray for our neighbors in our own faith community and for our neighbors around the world in distress, in joy, with everything in between. We hear of pain and suffering, we hear joyous shouts, we hear concern and caring. There are also those voices we will never hear but are well known to your ever-hearing presence. We hold all these things in our hearts, God, as we pray to you. Fashion us every day to be your hands and feet that spread the news of the Kingdom where ever we go, the Kingdom that breaks down walls instead of creating them. Let us be the church that honors the church of all time, the church of Jesus Christ. We lift up all these prayers, said and unsaid, in the name of the one who takes down barriers to foster love, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray one prayer as one people...

SERMON

There is a premise called the "zero-sum game." All sports are built around the principle. The premise is simple: there is a winner and a loser. Let's face it, it's the gospel of today's world. We thrive on it; we make everything a competition. It is appropriate for many things. Not everyone should get a ribbon for participation. The world of sports

needs to have a winner and loser. Not everyone can win an election; not everyone can be president. We need to learn how to lose so we can grow, so we can learn what it means to be a winner. Every sport needs to decide who is best, not who participates. But can we say the same in these walls? No, our faith is different. Christianity is not a zero-sum game. Christ does not create losers; humanity creates losers where they shouldn't. Christianity has become a zero-sum game, and the Gospel invitation becomes a measure of who is good in Christ's eyes and who is not. It's a problem that has stretched throughout the history of the church, but it is a problem of our doing, not of scripture's, not of God's. Let us see what divides us as we look at the problem of unity throughout history and a remedy that shows that unity among Christians, no matter how different, is grounded in scripture.

The church in Ephesus had a problem that every other church throughout all geography and all history has: how do we reconcile being around those not like us? How do we accept the grand vision of unity in the midst of so many practical differences? It was a wide-reaching problem of the first couple centuries of the church. Guess what? We haven't solved the issue. In biblical times, the big fight was between the Jews and the Gentiles, or, as it is said in the book, the circumcised and the uncircumcised. That was a big issue because it was at the heart of how the people determined faithfulness to God. It was at the heart of what it meant to be faithful, so, of course, it was of consequence.

Circumcision, after all, was a sign of God's covenant with Abraham. But this Jesus came and nothing really is the same anymore. There was a new covenant with the work of Jesus Christ, so does circumcision matter anymore? Eventually, the Council at Jerusalem, filled with the original apostles and which you can read about in Acts 15, decided that you could go either way. But this is Paul's particular take, a philosophical statement that leads to a

practical resolution. The Covenant stands for all time, but circumcision or non-circumcision doesn't matter; just fidelity to Christ's new covenant, open to all.

Circumcision is a sign, not the covenant itself. The main focus is now, as Paul puts it: "in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall...the hostility between us. He has abolished the law...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two thus making peace..." This doesn't mean that the law is meaningless, but it is not a dividing line anymore. The work of God has flung open the doors to all people to be "brought near by the Blood of Christ," whether or not they were a part of the original covenant to Abraham. The world changed. Faithfulness has a different face, and it is focused in the cross instead of rules. The sign of death has become the sign of life, and the ways of life are changed by eternal grace.

This chapter of Ephesians two is, like a Wheel of Fortune Puzzle, the "before and after," according to the New Interpreter's Commentary. The first part, which we didn't read this morning, was an account of the people as individuals before they knew the saving grace of Christ, where the distinctions of "Jew" and "Gentile" were at hand. "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived...All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath." But then the Grace of Christ came along, and all distinctions between Jew and Gentile went away, creating one community. Paul's not trying to "out" any particular sin; he's explaining the difference between the former way and the faithful way. The former way is clearly all about fulfilling one's own desires, the focus on one's self and one's preferences, while the faithful way is dropping one's own desires for the benefit of all. The former way is about the individual; the faithful way is about who we are together.

Therein lies the problem for all ages. With Christ's grace means that life is different, but we, in our very human ways, carry a lot of the old habits forward, like dividing lines, distinctions, difference used to separate and negate, not to lift up as just different. We live in a world where this message of unity despite diversity is largely forgotten. There was freedom given to those who are circumcised and those who are not to be in the open arms of fellowship, to be welcomed as Christ would welcome. It's the spirit of the law vs. the word of the law, where the sign of the covenant became more important than the spirit of the covenant. Not much has changed, as no matter where one goes, fellowship seems to be open to those who are alike. We see the issues as bigger than they should be. But our scripture today says something different. Only when we work together can the final verses happen: "In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." The "you" here is not individual. When you work with languages, you have to find a new way to say the second person plural beyond "you." It's "y'all" or, if you're from Texas, "all y'all." That means a lot, when we really get down to it. The dwelling place for God is the community of believers. The arc of scripture speaks of the church's work empowering the Christian. In our individualistic, self-righteous society, we like to think of the individual believer being the dwelling place for God, but there is a reason why we come to church, why we gather together, why we are different when together. It's a spirit that should invade the church; it is a spirit that should invade the church's work in the world.

If you look at this example, you can see where the opposite spirit gets us. There's an Internet game on social media called "cringeworthy." It's easy. Can I make you cringe using only three words? I'm sure I can. How about this..."Charge Conference

Preparations.” Or “Out of Snacks” or “It’s only Tuesday.” For some of you, “Frontier Days Crowds” might be on your list. But this is the one you really need to hear: United States Congress. See? I made you cringe. What should be our leading body has become a punch line, and it’s just downright sad. I see bumper stickers all over the place saying “give Congress a pink slip.” I don’t care what side of the aisle you agree with, those politicians you think are horrible, and those politicians you think are heroes. It doesn’t matter what your ideals are and what you believe. Perhaps you’re sick of the whole lot. Any way it is, it’s apparent that entrenched positions and all this posturing gets everyone nowhere. When it’s all about “I’m right; you’re wrong, and you’re a fool,” no good work can be done. Some see them as only trying to take care of themselves. The majority of Americans are so frustrated by Congress because every side thinks they are so right that they sabotage any efforts made by any other party, and everyone is frustrated because nothing gets done.

The church, throughout history and today, is the same. We can substitute any label today for “Gentiles vs. Jews” or “uncircumcised vs. circumcised.” We could say “liberals vs. conservatives” or “Methodist vs. any other denomination” or “the young and the old.” It’s so easy to find yourself in an entrenched position and disliking the other. I feel quite lucky that although there were disagreements at Annual Conference, they were kept rather civil. We disagreed on many issues, but we were not fractured by those differences. The way things are shaping up, it looks like I cannot say the same for the upcoming General Conference in Portland, Oregon in May 2016. We as Christians, more pointedly Methodists, are still divided by so much: gay marriage, our future as Methodists, age differences, how we carry our traditions into the future. Some are banging on the war drums about how “evil” the “other side” is. Some laugh at what “those people” think and how “they” justify

themselves. But that is not Christ's way. All of these things neglect the simple message of today: we are Christ's, and Christ has broken down the dividing wall between us. In all the stories of Jesus in the Gospels, I see no place where he did the same thing. Jesus, who is used as the justification for so many of these arguments, instead was the one who called out the hypocrisy of those who emphasized dividing lines and used scripture to beat one another down.

So, what then? Should we be forced into thinking we are all the same? Are differences bad? No, God created each of us differently, and God has reconciled our differences through the work of the Cross. The rest is our job. The problem is when the differences become an affirmation of who is better than the other. It could be done intentionally or unintentionally. It may be that difference makes us feel better or angry with how the difference may make us feel less than. Each and every day, this holy task requires a swallowing of pride. It requires we set aside judgment. It requires humility. It requires we sit with one another and just begin to understand one another's story, to hear as we want to be heard. At the end of the day, it's what we want done to us. It's amazing what can happen as a result. So many problems everywhere happen because we just don't listen to one another. We don't respect one another or stereotype one another. But Jesus didn't do that, and because he didn't, we have our example moving forward.

This is a drum I beat upon time and again, but there's a reason for it. The bottom line is this simple fact: it is biblical. It is faithfulness to the words of scripture. Therefore, if we want to be biblical, if we want to live by the words of scripture in our daily lives, they preach time and again unity in the midst of difference. It could be the correct details of faithfulness. It might be the original issue that divided the Eastern Church and the Western

Church in 1054: whether the Holy Spirit comes from the Father or from the Father and the Son. Ya know what? At the end of the day, it really doesn't matter. It really doesn't! We follow the same Christ and preach the same Gospel of life from the ministry of the Christ. Every church to which Paul wrote, every example of God's people beyond the first church of the disciples in Acts 2 had a problem with reconciling different expressions of the same faith. Throughout it all, Paul came to the same conclusion. No matter what, we are still one. We serve one God who gave us life, and when that is the focus, the Christ's love shines through. It's just that easy; it's just that hard. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.