

The Unity as God's gift

Isaiah 35:1-10, Ephesians 4:1-6, John 17:6a, 15-23

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I greet you on behalf of the Council of Bishops and the Northern Illinois Conference in the United Methodist Church.

It is a great honor and joy to be with you this evening, and share in this celebrations of centuries of faithful Christian witness in tri- communions, Episcopal, Lutheran and the United Methodist Church. Thanks for planning team of the National Workshop on Christian Unity and host church, St. Mary's Episcopal Church.

We are on a journey together, a journey from God and to God, a journey undertaken to the glory of the Triune God. We gather here together to celebrate God's one church, 'ecclesia una', and we recognize that the things that bind us together are much more significant than the things that divide us.

There is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all"; there is one kingdom of God which we are called to serve; there is one gospel and a common mission to proclaim it and live it; we do live in one world whose people we seek to serve for Christ's sake.

We cannot but thank God for the sign of progress, and sincerely trust that not only may this proposed communion be practiced, but that it will be more commitment of a wider God's movement which will be for God's glory and the bountiful blessings of the beloved community .

Tonight we cannot but rejoice at such like this celebration. It is most cheering to think that we as different communions coming to agreement regarding the need of unity and the message of the gospel.

Today religion is a hot topic in our public discourse. Of course, we often become a part of the conflict. This is what people struggling to be religious tend to do: They try to make sure they haven't missed anything. If adultery needs to be condemned, they want to be the first to throw a stone; if murder needs to be declaimed, they volunteer for the firing squad so they can demonstrate that the taking of human life is wrong; they want to be especially clear in their condemnation in the context of dominant cultural acceptance.

When I first became a Christian, I was one of those who wanted to be appropriately religious in all my actions. I was a teenager. So as a young Christian I came to believe that my new ways were absolutely "right," that everything of my Buddhist, Confucian and Shamanistic past was to be totally condemned. At that time, I had so much to learn. When my father died, I, as an arrogant young Christian, refused to participate in the rituals surrounding death that brought meaning and closure to my mother, siblings and wider family. They went to the mountains with

his remains, as our traditions required. I stayed resistant to follow traditional family rituals. They brought prayers to the god beyond us all, but I refused to pray since this god was not specifically named as the God of Christians.

My understanding of Christianity as a young convert had more to do with rejection of everything that seemed not specifically Christian than it did with adopting the ways of Christ – the pioneer and perfection of our faith. It was not until much more recently after my graduate study that on a return to my home village, I made the mountain pilgrimage to my father's grave. I repented of my arrogance and made peace with my father and my past.

This I learned that the exclusion and the rejection to inclusiveness and accommodation to others was the God I experienced through Jesus Christ.

We hear powerful mystery of the unity from the gospel:

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-24)

In Jesus' heart he prays to direct and guide his Church with unfailing care and love.

Jesus renews us evermore in her first love and grants us to be part of wonderful and sacred mystery. “I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one”

Notice that Jesus uses various components in His prayer; he prays for the unity of the Christians, he prays for the unity of Christians with Him, and He also prays for His unity with the Creator ("and You in Me").

Gospel of John celebrates the Christian Unity as God's gift in mystery of divine relationship; First, John was clear that our Unity is based upon the self-giving / self-emptying God.

One of the things that the Bible reveals to us about God's character is that the God of Israel, Jesus and the Church is a giving God. God gives the promise of God's care and presence. God gives grace and forgiveness. We know that what God gives is sufficient, because God not only gives his blessings, but divine-self. This is the strange economy of God.

God gives God-self to humankind by becoming human in Christ. God gives God's Spirit in us to help us live the Christian life and console us. The God of Scriptures can thus rightly be depicted as a self-giving/self-emptying God.

The Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf gives the important reminder that the value of the doctrine of the Trinity is not merely about "fluid identities," "plurality-in-unity" or "one-and-many," but about the relationship of identity and otherness. He sees the Christian unity as God's self-giving gift for each of us.

Volf said, “Without this focus on God's self-giving or self-donation, trinitarian discourse remains at a certain level of abstraction that does not touch the heart of what the life-giving narratives of Scripture reveal about the character of God.”

Second, in John's description it shows the dynamic emergence in the mystery of other-receiving God.

The Triune God is a hospitable and welcoming God and nothing be discriminated there.

The Triune God is not an enclosed circle, but an inviting openness with room for the whole of creation.

We see this openness of God towards other-ness, once again, most clearly when we come together as beloved children of God, even though we came from different denominations and different cultural background. We are here because God nevertheless kept the arms open to enable reconciliation and embrace.

It is a loving openness for all people and the whole of creation. This openness of God shows a special face with regard to those who have experienced exclusion at the hand of others.

Third, so we dare to dream to be with God-in- communion in the National Workshop on Christian Unity.

John suggests in this chapter that the image which God reveals to us is not one of eternal solitude, but of eternal communion.

In Jesus' prayer it is clear that the movement within the Godhead is not merely within an enclosed circle. No, it is an outward movement.

“The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-24)

YES, we come together for fulfilling the unconditional inter-relationship as God's people.

Martin Luther's theological imagination focuses in the grace of God. The Triune God is the self-giving God. God gives people more than their due. God gives mercy where people deserve judgment. This is what Martin Luther called the “strange justice” of God.

As people created in the image of this God we are to mirror something of this "strange justice." God is a God that shows openness to the whole of Creation and universe.

A sad reality within Christianity is that Christians have often excluded what God has accepted. This we must confess. We must also receive the forgiveness that enables us to reflect something of the same wideness and generosity of God's mercy.

I have learned recently of ‘transformative accommodation’ from the statement of *The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams in his foundation lecture in England society: “Hence 'transformative accommodation': both jurisdictional parties may be changed by their encounter over time, and we avoid the sterility of mutually exclusive monopolies. ‘Transforming accommodation’ is the way in which a wider public discourse over time impacts on a religious community as it thinks through its own standards and philosophies. I think that where there is a good communicative relationship involved; where there is transparency, it's inevitable.”*

I believe Archbishop Williams' “the transforming accommodation” is originated from the nature of God's grace in this conflicted time of the world. We must think and act prayerfully in the midst of religious conflicts.

Apostle Paul says that a life worthy of our calling and leading to unity of Spirit is "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love."

Paul gives the objective ground in reality for the subjective experience of unity that we are to pursue. The unity of the Spirit that we should be so diligent for is based on a given, objective unity outside ourselves that we have nothing to do with creating or defining. It is there, and we are humbly to recognize it and submit to it and rejoice in it and live it out.

It is God's gift to the Christian community.

One body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Father: This is the objective foundation of our diligent efforts to preserve the unity of the Spirit. It is not a fragile or ultimately vulnerable thing. It rests on the oneness of God, the oneness of faith, the oneness of baptism, and the oneness of the body. Those things are one, no matter what you or I do. They are fixed realities. Our task is to walk worthily of them.

In his sermon John Wesley said, "It should always be remembered that the word walk, in the language of the Apostle, is of a very extensive signification. It includes all our inward and outward motions; all our thoughts, and words, and actions. It takes in, not only everything we do, but everything we either speak or think. It is, therefore, no small thing "to walk," in this sense of the word, "worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called;" to think, speak, and act, in every instance in a manner worthy of our Christian calling. " (Sermon 74, "Of the Church.")

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we need to know the greatness of our calling, so that we, having one spirit of faith and love, may live in the world as new and holy generation. May our church everywhere be a force for peace with justice, and for healing and the reconciliation.

Where God will lead the church in the future is now an unknown. People of faith do not begin a journey knowing the final destination. However, people of faith know they are on a journey and the final destination is in God's hand. The direction is revealed by God in Jesus Christ and the first steps are to be taken by leaders in each communion.

God is calling us to advance by risk taking and peace-making and living in the troubled world. This is God's time for the church shown as a visible sign of unity in the world. We prayerfully demonstrate a work of heart for the transformation of world. Amen.