100th Anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity

Worship Resources

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2. Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Sunday, January 24, 2010

A central focus for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is the will of Christ for the unity of all his followers. Christians differ about the **form** of this oneness. On a spectrum, one end sees the unity of the church as a single institution. At the other end of the spectrum, different expressions of the church are understood to share a common faith and common mission, purpose, and mutual respect and support.

Regardless of where denominations, movements, congregations, and ministers land on this spectrum, at least four dimensions express the unity God has already given the church in Christ.

First, the unity of the church makes this essential theological statement: God is one. The oneness of God should shape the oneness of the church. When the church is one, it reflects the oneness of God. When the church is fractured, it not only denies the oneness of God, but effectively suggests many gods (each god made in the image of a different church).

Biblical scholars stress that the oneness of God does not mean sameness. In the biblical context, the oneness of God refers to purpose. The one God created the world, yet the world is an arena of breathtaking diversity. At their best, the different elements of the world serve God's common purposes of love, peace, justice, abundance and mutual support.

Second, the unity of the church demonstrates one of God's important purposes: that all peoples live together as One Great Human Family. In technical theological language, the unity of the church is an eschatological sign. The oneness of the Christian fellowship points to the great community in which God wants all creation to live and in which all elements of creation would be optimally blessed.

Third, unity is important to the practical everyday life of the church. When various manifestations of the church burn up energy maintaining their separate structures and ministries (or worse, fussing and fighting), the church has less energy for mission. Its witness in the world is compromised.

Fourth, while the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has traditionally focused upon unity among churches and Christians, many congregations today are fractured and broken. Preacher, worship leaders, and congregational leaders might take the occasion of this Week to reflect on the degree to which the congregation needs to give attention to its own common life.

Call to Worship*

Leader: Our Disciples ancestor Thomas Campbell said, "The church of Christ upon the earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one."
People: We give thanks to God who already makes us one with all other Christians.
Leader: Our Disciples ancestor Barton W. Stone said, "Christian unity is our polar star."
People: We give thanks to God for the Holy Spirit continuing to point us towards this star.
Leader: Our Disciples ancestor Alexander Campbell approved of the old adage, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."
People: We give thanks to God for bringing us into community of love, with a living core but with freedom to find our own ways.

[Worship materials marked by an asterisk were prepared by Linda McKiernan-Allen and Ron Allen].

Opening Prayer*

One God of the many churches,
we confess we sometimes ignore the voices in our own tradition
calling us to recognize the common life we share with other Christians.
We sometimes become focus on our congregation or denomination as if they were idols.
We turn away from opportunities for common witness.
We treat other Christians with disdain.
Through today's scripture, preaching, prayers, hymns and common meal,
help us live into your vision
for a church with a common spirit,
a church in which all congregations and denominations
not only respect one another but seek to learn from one another,
a church that is a sign of your will for all peoples to live together
in communities of love, peace, joy, and abundance.
Through Christ, in whom all Christians are already joined. Amen.

Responsive Prayer

Right side: Holy Spirit of Freedom, as the poor long for abundance shared and injustice ended,
Left side: and the Church longs for unity;
Right side: Challenge us to see these two visions as vital threads in a single tapestry;
Left side: Sharpen our wit and imagination to weave the two together.
Right side: Carry us from this moment to live fully in the unity of Jesus
Left side: for the life of the world
All: to the glory of God!

[Adapted from the official Week of Prayer for Christian Unity materials, written by Carolyn Smyth]

Significant Quote

Michael Kinnamon, a prominent Disciples and General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, offers a significant perspective on why it is important to work for Christian unity. This quote might appear in the sermon, in the congregational newsletter or website, in the worship bulletin or on the screen in the worship space.

"Any ecumenical dialogue, any convergence, that may prompt us to deeper Christian fellowship is a minority voice of protest against the "us/them" mentality of our age, an act of witness against the human inclination to live only in like-minded enclaves, a rejection of the widespread tendency to define ourselves by the ways we differ from others rather than by what we hold in common. More positively, it is a way of showing that we believe in a power that can bring us together in visible *koinonia* across the dividing walls of hostility in this very broken world. The problem is not that we fiddle with dogma while the world burns, but that we fail to live out the implications of our sacramental life in the world, fail to allow our theological convergences to be translated into the kind of fellowship that would serve as a sign of reconciliation."

Michael Kinnamon, *Why It Matters: A Popular Introduction to the Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Text* The Risk Book Series (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985), p. 58.

Invitation to the Table*

Jesus knew what it was like to struggle with people divided and in conflict. His own disciples were divided and conflicted as they tried to follow him. In the end, Peter denied him and the others fled. Jesus' last hours, he was even divided and in conflict within himself as to whether or not he would go to the cross. "If you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). The Roman Empire considered him such a threat that they crucified him.

Yet, in the midst of his struggles, Jesus felt God's presence. No matter how uncertain, difficult, or conflicted the situation, God was with Jesus.

We, too, often find ourselves in situations that are divided and conflicted. This can be true even when we witness to the unity of all Christians and—especially —when we witness to God's will for all people to live together in mutual support.

At such times, God uses the loaf and the cup to assure us of God's presence in every division and in every moment of every conflict. The bread and the cup do not magically heal brokenness and conflict, but they give us the confidence to face into the struggle.

Notes for Preaching (based on the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary for January 24, 2010)*

Luke 4:14-21

The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts tell one continuous story. When working with a text in the Gospel, the preacher should follow its themes into Acts. Moreover, Luke-Acts presupposes the apocalyptic (end-time) notion that history is divided into two ages—the present, fractious evil

age that is about to end and the coming Realm of God when all of creation will live in love, peace, joy, abundance and mutual support. A primary problem of the old age is fractured human community along lines such as Jew and gentile, gender, social class and stratification. In the Realm, God seeks to re-gather many different human families into one great human community.

According to Luke, Jesus was God's representative, coming to announce the Realm partially present in the ministry of Jesus would come in fullness when Jesus returned. Between the time Jesus ascended (Acts 1:6-11) and the time when Jesus returned, the Holy Spirit is to empower the church's witness to the coming of the Realm. As in the case of Jesus' own ministry, the church is to announce the presence and coming of the Realm and embody aspects of the Realm in its own life.

The real text for today is Luke 4:14-30. The interpreter does violence to the text by dividing it into two readings as the lectionary does.

While the text does not directly address the question of Christian unity in the contemporary sense, the emphasis of the passage on the role of the church in witnessing to the Realm of God can lead the preacher to reflect on how manifesting Christian unity is itself a witness to the Realm.

In the reading from Luke, Jesus announces the purpose of his ministry. Although the actual words "Realm of God" do not appear, the ancient reader would immediately recognize the Realm as the main theme of Jesus's ministry (and that of the church) when Jesus reads from Isaiah 58:6 and 61:1-2 (in Luke 4:18-19). Many apocalyptic writers in antiquity believed that material from Isaiah referred to the Realm.

Christians today immediately see the broader social implications of the announcement that God has poured the Holy Spirit on Jesus to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Many see this points to redistribution of land and other resources, as in the Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-12). Poverty, oppression and blindness interrupt God's purposes for human community. God is at work to end poverty and all forms of oppression, to help people perceive the world as God sees it, and to redistribute material resources so that all can live abundantly. The Holy Spirit empowers and mandates Jesus' followers to continue this witness and to join God in this work (Acts 1:5-6; 2:1-42)

Preachers less often note that each of the elements in the passage also apply to the church. When some in the church are impoverished, the community provides Realm-like material support (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37). When members of the church encounter opposition and are made captives (imprisoned) because of their witness to the Realm, God frees them (Acts 5:17-21; 12:6-11; 16:23-29). When people are blind to God's purposes to bring the Realm, God opens their eyes (Acts 9:1-19).

In Luke 4:20-30 makes explicit the fact that the Realm includes a great reunion of Jewish and gentile peoples. Through the prophet Elijah, God fed a gentile widow in the gentile land of

Zarephath (Luke 4:25-26; 1 Kings 17:1-16). Through the prophet Elisha, God healed Naaman the Syrian, a general in an army that was often at war with Israel (Luke 4:27; 2 Kings 5:1-14).

The passage foresees conflict both for Jesus and for the church when they bear witness to the Realm. The congregation in the synagogue is enraged when Jesus uses the widow at Zarephath and Naaman to reinforce the notion that the Realm will embrace gentiles. Indeed, they seek to put Jesus to death (Luke 4:28-29). However, God sustains Jesus by leading Jesus through the midst of the crowd (even as God led Israel through the Red Sea) (Luke 4:30).

As noted earlier, the preacher can read this passage through the lens of God's will for Christian unity. The church is often in league with the old age with respect to Christian unity. We assume that division and conflict among denominations is "normal." We are blind to God's will for the church to witness to the great reunion of all peoples by bringing together Christian communities. Indeed, we are sometimes imprisoned (made captive) to our own limited imaginations as we cling to our denominations (and other current forms of church life) without considering how we could reconfigure ourselves to better witness to Realm-like community. Indeed, within the church we can exercise power in ways that become as oppressive to others as the Roman Empire oppressed people in Jesus's day. We can become as angry the suggestion that God seeks community with Christians (and others) who are as different and objectionable to us as the widow and Naaman were different from the crowd in the synagogue.

Yet, God continues to pour the Holy Spirit on the church to search for ways to express the qualities of Realm community in the relationship of the churches. Luke warns us that individuals and congregations who take the lead in manifesting the eschatological reunion of God's scattered people can expect the same kind of opposition that met Jesus and the church in Acts. However, one of Luke's underlying points in today's reading is that God sustains the followers of Jesus today who witness to the coming of God's realm in ways similar to God's provision for Jesus and for the church in Acts.

From this perspective, Christian unity is not just a matter of ecclesial reorganization. It is a matter of witnessing to the Realm of God.

[For more on preaching Luke and Acts, see Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching Luke-Acts.* Preaching Classic Texts (Chalice Press, 2000)].

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Paul believed in a similar end-time (apocalyptic) understanding of the world as Luke (described above). Paul had confidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus marked the turning point of the ages. A key part of the vocation of the church was to embody qualities of community in the new age (the Realm of God). The Realm would be a new world. Because the Realm of God would be a material realm, the apocalyptic tradition placed great importance on what people did in their human (material) bodies. A person could use the body to point to the Realm or to deny the Realm.

The congregation in Corinth was quarreling over multiple issues. These include sexual freedom, whether to eat food offered to idols, questions about Paul's authority, whether women should have their heads uncovered when they led worship, the rich and the poor not eating together at the Sacred Meal, some in the community declaring their spiritual gifts to be superior to the gifts of others, services of worship that were chaotic and did not build up the community, and people believing there would be no final judgment or resurrection of the dead.

The quarrels originated from a group of outsiders who came into the Corinthian community teaching a radical form of realized eschatology. They had no place for a future eschatology. They taught that the Holy Spirit released people in the present from the restrictive rules governing how people lived. Indeed, people no longer needed to try to live in eschatological community since they were freed from all forms of human restraint.

In First Corinthians, the apostle Paul calls the community to renounce false teaching and live together as God intends. In today's passage, Paul uses the image of the body on three levels to persuade the Corinthians to turn away from the false teaching and to embrace his own theology and ethics. In the background (as already noted) is Paul's conviction that on the final day of judgment, God will call the Corinthians to account for what they have (and have not) done in their bodies. For preachers who structure sermons according to points, the following paragraphs might suggest a three-point message.

(1) Paul stresses that members of the congregation are joined with one another in the same way parts of a body are joined together. For Paul, this is a fact already accomplished by the death and resurrection of Christ. The Corinthians are not Christians circulating as individually liberated spirits. The members of the Corinthian congregation are an organic community in the same way that the body is one organic whole. Therefore, they need to live with one another in Realm-like ways. From this point of view, the sermon claims Christian unity is already our God-given identity. Our role is to manifest the eschatological community in which we already stand.

(2) By using the image of the body for the church as community, Paul reminds the Corinthians that what they do in their own particular, individual bodies does matter. Our behaviors have consequences that affect ourselves, other individuals, and the communities in which we live. For Paul, the Corinthians can either live eschatologically in the body, or not. Each element of the body needs to do its part in supporting the other parts of the body. The body as a whole needs to embody the qualities of the Realm of God. The preacher can stress how churches relate materially with one another does matter.

(3) Many people in antiquity believed the human body was a miniature representation of the community as a whole. The body was a mirror of primary social reality. The church is a community that is parallel to the body. When the Corinthians misuse their own bodies by violating God's purposes for eschatological community, they misrepresent ultimate reality and its possibilities. From the standpoint of Christian unity, a divided church misrepresents God's purposes for the body of Christ and for larger human community. A broken church is a broken mirror of God's primary will for human community. A broken church leaves the impression, then, that God authorizes fractured community.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written when the leaders of Israel had returned to Judah after the exile. Although they expected their return to be a time unmitigated joy, some elements of their return were disappointing. The land was depleted. The cities were in disarray. The community was lethargic. One of the first items on their agenda was to rebuild the temple and thus restore a primary symbol of community identity, but work had lagged. Moreover, many in the community were disturbed because some Israelites married gentiles.

A preacher might compare working to manifest Christian unity with the task of regenerating the land and rebuilding the temple. The preacher might identity ways churches today are in a similar situation with respect to Christian unity: disappointed, depleted, lethargic about rebuilding Christian community, fearful about threats to Christian identity posed by those who are Other to us in ways similar that the gentiles were Other to the people of Israel.

The books of Ezra-Nehemiah seek to reinforce community identity and to reinvigorate community life by calling the people to follow Torah. Today's passage is key in this regard as it describes a national event when the people came together at the Water Gate (near the site of the temple) to hear Ezra read from the Torah "from early morning to midday" (Nehemiah 8:3). (No one today should complain about the length of a sermon!) The Levites moved among the people to clarify the meaning of the Torah (Nehemiah 8:8). With the proper explanation, the people rejoiced and were renewed (Nehemiah 8:9-12).

A primary concern of Torah is to remind the community that God has made covenant with t hem and that the people are in covenant with one another. The Torah provides principles and guidelines (laws) for how to live together in covenant. The key feature of people living together in covenant is mutual support. All members of the community are to support one another.

Christian dis-unity violates covenant among the followers of Christ. Indeed, dis-unity sometimes manifests itself through competition, and even disdain of some Christians and churches for others. For the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the preacher might call the congregation to gather at the Water Gate (figuratively speaking) and urge them towards actively living in covenant with other Christians.

Closing Prayer*

God of all life,
You have brought us to know these things:
In order to unite with one another, we must love one another;
in order to love one another, we must know one another;
in order to know one another, we must go and meet one another.
So send us now from this worship hour into your larger world to meet, to know, to love and to unite.
In Christ's name, AMEN

[These italicized words, known as the "Testament of Cardinal Mercier," are the impetus for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity].

Possible Hymns and Songs
(Numbers in parenthesis are from the Chalice Hymnal)

"Somos Uno en Cristo" (493)
"Unidos" (496)
"Many are the Lightbeams" (492)
"As Grain Scattered on the Hillsides" (491)
"Restless Weaver, Ever Spinning" (658)
"In Christ There Is No East or West" (685)

Additional Resources

Additional resources are available from http://geii.org/wpcu_index.htm.

The Writers

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Ron teaches preaching and Gospels and Letters at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. One of his books—just published—is designed to help Sunday School classes, Bible study groups, and individuals explore the range of what Christians believe about God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the church, and God's purposes in the world: *A Faith of Your Own: Naming What You Really Believe.* In addition to being short and inexpensive, this volume includes questions for discussion at the end of each chapter.