

A Crisis of Unity

Ezekiel 37:15-28 1 Corinthians 1:4-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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We are an anxious people. We are a polarized people. And I'm referring to Americans, in general. Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, distress or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome. Anxiety is an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear, often mixed with doubt about our own ability to cope with it.

As I shared just this past week with one of our ministry teams here at College Hill, and again yesterday at our Annual Session Retreat, "One of the greatest gifts a pastor can offer a congregation (as well as to himself/herself), is to be a **non-anxious presence**. As human beings, however, this isn't always easy, even when trying hard to be intentional." I must confess that I am struggling at the moment to be that non-anxious presence. Perhaps you are, as well. For me, a lot of my anxiety, especially this week, is found in the juxtaposition and tension between living into the call for empathy, social justice and equality for all, as espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr, whose life and ministry we celebrate with a national holiday tomorrow, and the inauguration and transfer of power to Donald Trump as the next President of the United States.

No, that's not as much a political statement as you might think. It involves how many of us are trying to deal with the anxiety and fears resulting from Trump's own words during the presidential campaign, which many of us socially progressive types perceived as misogynistic and sexist, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant, anti-Mexican, anti-anyone who has a different opinion, and so much more that for us seem to be a violation of our own understanding of Christian morality and sense of empathy for others. I'm also having a hard time following my own advice to not panic before we see how this all plays out; and in following my mantra for this year, "Be hopeful."

I guess what I'm trying to say is **as Americans we are facing a crisis of unity**. A big part of the problem, which has been commonly known for quite some time, was wonderfully expressed by **President Barack Obama in his Farewell Address** earlier this week.

For too many of us, it's become safer to retreat into our own bubbles, whether in our neighborhoods or on college campuses, or places of worship, or especially our social media feeds, surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions.

The rise of naked partisanship, and increasing economic and regional stratification, the splintering of our media into a channel for every taste -- all this makes this great sorting seem natural, even inevitable.

And increasingly, we become so secure in our bubbles that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions, instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there.

Let's be honest with ourselves, that includes the left just as much as the right. For yes, **the political system is inherently divisive**, all but forcing us to pick a side and defend it – no matter who gets hurt in the process. And contrary to the original hope of faith traditions, regardless of the affiliation, **the religious system is similarly divisive**.

Where's the unity in our diversity?

Knowing how important it is to proceed with a consensus on how we define terms, especially in a religious context, here's a starting point to understanding this concept of unity. Unity is the state or quality of being in accord and in harmony; having a singleness of purpose or action; of being joined as a whole. And as can never be stated enough, **unity is not equivalent with uniformity**, where everything must be exactly the same. For instance, there can be a state of living together in unity even when there are differences of opinion, belief and practice. I'm especially impressed, for instance, how the Interfaith community here in Tulsa exemplifies that ideal.

Yet, the quest to find and live in unity is, and always has been, quite a struggle. That's especially true in a culture that allows an ever-increasing amount of pluralism, as in a community of people with a variety of differences in cultural background and heritage, religious and theological perspectives, political points of views, and even social norms. And what's fascinating is that I'm not just talking about living in the United States in the 21st century, but also in what was going on in the ancient Greek town of Corinth in the 1st century. This is what the apostle Paul shares in 1 Corinthians with that Christian community, which he founded, about living in unity.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Incorporating a broader historical perspective, we learn that *all* religious faith traditions have addressed this issue of seeking and experiencing unity.

From a Hindu sacred text:

May the divine create between us and strangers
A unity of hearts.
May we unite in our minds,
Unite in our purposes and
Not fight against the divine spirit
Within us.
(Atharva Veda)

From a Buddhist sacred text:

Happy is the unity of the [assembly] (Sangha).
Happy is the discipline of ones so united.
(Dhammapada)

From a Baha'i text:

O contending people and kindreds of the earth!
Set your faces toward unity,
And let the radiance of its light shine upon you.
(Baha'u'llah)

From a Jewish sacred text:

How good and pleasant it is
When kindred dwell together in unity!
(Psalm 133:1)

The ancient struggle of how to find unity in the midst of diversity continues to be among our most pressing modern struggles, both secular and religious. Years ago, the World Council of Churches developed the slogan, "**Doctrines divide, but service unites.**" A few years ago, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministries (TMM), of which College Hill is an active member, adopted a similar slogan, "**We need not believe alike to love alike.**" **Unity, then, is more about mutual forbearance** (to use a historical Presbyterian phrase), **and it involves the genuine desire to build respectful, trusting relationships among persons with varied perspectives and views.**

Is it also not true, for example, that no one Christian, no single denomination or congregation within a denomination (including ours) has the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? The same holds true with political parties. Following this line of thought, perhaps unity begins by recognizing that every perspective and position has its strengths AND its weaknesses; its truth AND its prejudices; its clear sense of vision AND its blind spots. That's why we need each other.

We need to find better ways to disagree without being so disagreeable. That, too, has been a harder struggle for me lately. In a sermon on this same Sunday eight years ago, I reflected, "It is indeed my hope that Barack Obama helps this country find a way to step back from the brink of such paralyzing and polarizing divisiveness that had gripped this country and this world for far too long." Unfortunately, it seems like we're more polarized than we were eight years ago.

Now if Donald Trump asks me to be one of his religious faith advisors (and I'm just waiting for his tweet), I would share with him the vision presented in the Old Testament passage I read earlier from Ezekiel 37. The prophet Ezekiel, who lived before, during, and after the Babylonian exile, relates a vision that depicts two pieces of wood, symbolizing the two kingdoms into which Israel had been divided. The names of the tribes in each of the divided kingdoms (two of the original twelve tribes in the North, called the Kingdom of Israel, and the other ten tribes in the South, called the Kingdom of Judah) are written upon the two pieces of wood, which are then brought together again into one (Ezekiel 37:15-23).

For Ezekiel this unity is not simply the joining of previously divided groups; it is rather a new creation, the birth of a new people that should be a sign of hope to other peoples and indeed to all of humanity. **In God's hands, these two sticks become one. It is a dynamic image of the power of God to bring about reconciliation, to do for a people entrenched in division what they cannot do for themselves. This is a highly evocative metaphor for divided Christians, and for a politically divided nation.**

It's not hard to imagine the names we might want to carve into those two sticks.

One Republican, the other Democrat.
One conservative, the other liberal.
One white, the other racial ethnic.
One male, the other female.
One urban, the other rural.
One straight, the other LGBT.

One citizen, the other refugee.
One rich, one poor.
One educated, the other uneducated.
One North, the other South.
One Tulsa, the other Oklahoma City.
Do I dare say, one Sooner, the other Longhorn.

Let's face it, the list of things we find to divide ourselves from each other is almost endless. So what would it mean if we allowed God to work in and through us to find not uniformity, but unity? It might require that each of those two sticks become **flexible** enough to be able to be entwined with the other. Each individual stick might find that it is stronger when combined with what had previously been considered it's polar opposite. The yin and the yang. I truly believe that in the sight of God we are already one, for we are all children of God. What will it take for us to understand and recognize this as well?

So with all this in mind as we enter into this historic week, let us remember, then, the words of Paul, "...be united in the same mind and the same purpose," and Ezekiel's vision of the two sticks "...that they may be one in God's hand."

May God help us, and bless us, as we walk *together* into the uncertain future that lies ahead.

Amen.

Resources:
Resources for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 2009