

Homily at St. John in the Wilderness Church, Flat Rock, NC  
May 29, 2022  
Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26  
The Rev. Patricia Tanzer Askew

We were getting ready to move in a few months and I still had one large item on my bucket list. And it was an important one. A few years earlier, Stephen, my husband, had invited a group of church pastors representing not only all the different Christian denominations in town, but also those of other faith traditions to a gathering each month. The hope is that we would get to know one another and form some type of unity - whatever that would look like - despite our diversity.

It was slow going with very few attending the monthly meetings at first, but then a few more came, and, finally, twelve to fifteen - representing Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Unitarian Universalists, Lutherans, Methodists, United Church's of Christ, Quakers, and Mormons . We discussed issues in our own churches and, later on when trust had been built, personal issues that weighed heavily on us. Then we began to plan joint activities. The Blessing of the Animals always led by the Episcopal church was now sponsored by the Interfaith group - complete with a rewritten liturgy that everyone could live with. We occasionally preached at each other's churches, and we gathered together for meals. In short, we became trusted friends - unified, despite our diversity.

So... back to my bucket list. This was my idea. Why not have representatives from all of the faith communities in town walk together in the university homecoming parade. It would be glorious - with signs of our individual churches held high and a long banner out front stating "unity not uniformity" - - -

declaring to the whole world - well, at least to the few hundred gathered for the parade in Laramie, Wyoming, that we, indeed, had unity despite our differences. It was possible.

Didn't Paul have a similar idea about creating unity among very diverse people as he urged people to walk behind the banner stating, "We are saved through grace and are the body of the resurrected Christ." That Jewish persecutor of Christians turned Christian missionary extraordinaire and theologian traveled all over the Mediterranean world sharing his experience with the resurrected Christ with Jews and Gentiles from many different backgrounds, beliefs, languages, and customs. Unity despite their differences.

Now Paul didn't work alone. In the travelogue we heard this morning in the book of Acts, we hear that he traveled on this particular trip with Silas. But he had other travel companions and acquaintances all over the Mediterranean. There are 14 very significant people mentioned in his letters and in the book of Acts with whom he closely worked and there were many others in the churches on whom he relied to spread and develop the faith. He was a planner with great organizational abilities. And God, certainly, worked through Paul's natural abilities and skill sets to spread the gospel and unity among believers.

But sometimes even the best laid plans develop a few rough spots and challenges along the way. This was certainly true for us as we planned our parade in Laramie, Wyoming. The plan was to contact all the 50 plus churches and faith communities in town to get them excited and committed to joining our walk in the parade.

We soon realized that while we sought unity, not everyone did. And we had many no thank you's, some angry hang-ups, and several "I'll give that some thought" - never to be heard from again.

I personally talked with leaders of one church in town three times. On one visit I was given a whole list of issues their church was against. We soon realized that they simply could not walk next to their fellow Christians - knowing that their beliefs differed greatly from their own - let alone people from non-Christian faith communities.

A defeat? In some sense - yes, representatives from that church did not walk in the parade, but they did talk with me three times before that decision was made. That alone showed some attempt at seeing the value in unity with diversity - even if they would not walk next to me. And who knows where the outcome our discussions will ultimately lead. God works in mysterious ways and always toward love and unity.

So what exactly happened during Paul's trip to Phillipi? The slave girl with the spirit of divination was really aggravating Paul as she followed him around town. And so he said to the spirit controlling her, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it did. And with it a big chunk of her owner's source of income. So those slave owners went to the police and had Paul and Silas thrown in prison for being subversives. Surely this was not part of the trip plans and must have been discouraging to the imprisoned evangelists.

But was it a defeat? No. For as they were praying and singing in that prison cell, an earthquake opened up the doors and allowed all the prisoners freedom.

When the jailor, who was distraught with the repercussions of having his prisoners escape found out that they had chosen to stay in place, he, and his household, became believers.

God does work in mysterious ways. Paul's motivation to quiet the slave girl was quite selfish, but God used it anyway to free her. Being thrown in prison was certainly not part of the plan, but God used it to save the jailor and his whole family. If you read the book of Acts, you will see that Paul's plans were often changed or upended for one reason or the other. Life happens. But Paul's sharing of the gospel always continued, despite all.

So, how important is this unity of believers? Back in the third century of the common era, Origin of Alexandria said that "church unity prefigures the future unity of all humankind." If that is true, then our unity as people of faith is essential for the well being of everyone now and to come. Conversely, if we are at odds with our brothers and sisters of the faith, others will not be encouraged to listen to the gospel message - much less put their foot inside the door of a place of worship.

This week Brian McLaren wrote in Richard Rohr's daily meditation about how the church has lost this sense of unity and inclusion that its founder, Jesus, was all about. When the church became the Roman Empire's official religion under Constantine in the fourth century, it generally began blessing whatever the empire was doing - and much of that was violent and contrary to the teachings of Jesus, and contrary to love in general.

As the church developed doctrine and rules, it became a hostile place for anyone whose ideas differed. Brian points out that “choosing to differ” is the root meaning of the word heresy. Tens of thousands of people were prosecuted, and many tortured, and executed because their views differed from the official church doctrine. We have quite a history.

Today our disunity shows up in much more subtle ways. We use such tactics as “shunning, disowning, shaming, character assassination, humiliation”.... So, often, fellow Christians with other ideas simply fade away and leave the church and we can go about our business. But, of course, we all suffer for it.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus, in the hours before his arrest and death, didn't pray for his own life, but for the continuation and godly care of those who had been under his care. Jesus says in the book of John, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”

So we do what we can to build up this unity, this oneness. We talk and share together, we work to make the world a better place together, we move outside these church walls and seek out the “others” and invite them in to be included. We go beyond our comfort zones and dare to accept that ours is not the only way to worship and believe. We listen to others. We risk the hurt of having a person say, “No”, to an idea we suggest. God, of course, gives us support and, indeed, works through our efforts, but we, as Christ's hands and feet, need to get out there and do what we can in the spirit of love. And not only are we called to do this, but we made a promise in our baptismal covenant that we would.

As one commentator states, “Jesus models the truth that the deepest moments of life are those when our hearts and habits are wide enough to include others.” We are called, as was Paul, to invite others to join this community of believers; this parade of diverse people walking together through life.

And, as we were reminded this week in Texas, we live in a world of violence and hurt and non acceptance and fear with people crying out for the love of Christ to envelop them - whether they realize it or not. And it will be our arms that Christ will use to comfort them in these dark and frightening times. And it will be the love of Christ seen through us that will allow positive change to take place.

Well, our attempts to have everyone participate in the parade of unity back in 2018 in Laramie, Wyoming did not happen. But ten different faith communities did gather together and walk. And people watching the parade waved and cheered and marveled out loud that we were walking together - people who were not the same, theologically quite different in fact, but people who believed in unity even with diversity.

I think Paul would have been proud. Amen.