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Become the Gift

World Communion Sunday – Reconciliation Sunday
2 Corinthians 5:16-20
October 5, 2008

Climbing into a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) pulpit and lifting up the value of World Communion Sunday and Reconciliation Sunday should be the easiest charge.

You see, there are many Christian denominations for which unity and reconciliation are simply values among a multitude of values, where unity and reconciliation have to battle for their time in the limelight. A leader of the Assemblies of God at a recent national ecumenical gathering, said that the Assemblies of God are for Christian unity, but not at all costs, that Christian unity has to be balanced as a goal, with other goals, such as with doctrinal purity on other issues.

But in Disciples congregations, we have always said, that unity is our **polar star**. Disciples have often repeated the manta, “Schism” – the breaking of the bonds of Christisn fellowship – “Schism is Sin.”

So if other Christians are confused about whether yesterday’s vote of the Pittsburgh Diocese of the Episcopal Church to withdraw from the Episcopal Church in the United States’ fellowship, and instead align themselves with a South American branch of the worldwide Anglican communion because the S. American churches more closely reflect their conservative theology, well, some Christians might be confused because

there is value in doctrinal similarity on the one hand, and on the other there is a value to expressing Christian unity within the nation... We Disciples have a relatively easy time making that call. "Schism is Sin," we say. Christian unity is what we've stood for so clearly.ⁱ

So preaching to Disciples about unity should be easy. But the fact is, as our denomination history of the last 2 centuries teaches, easy it is not. Because the hard lesson that we have learned is that the vaulted and noble ideals of Christian unity, are nothing but a nice idea until we find a way to make them real... to incarnate them in our lives... sacrificing differences that we hold dear- for the sake of greater unity- is often not easy at all.

An example is right on our horizon, the UCC Forum to be held three weeks from today right here in our sanctuary on the topic of the Morality of Armed Conflict. Most of the folks coming to that Forum that afternoon will bring with them strong positions on when it is OK for themselves and for nations to use force, to use violence.

Some of those who come will be ready to quote Jesus:

"for all who take the sword will perish by the sword"ⁱⁱ and "

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Other people of faith will come calling themselves **realists**, ready to say that in this world of pressure and power, even the religious must be always ready to take up arms do battle to promote justice and protect one's nation.

Most of the folks coming to that forum will arrive already very clear about where they stand and why. And most of the folks coming to this forum will arrive very sure that their opinion is the correct opinion.

Now, since the issues are very important, and they are not private issues, but public policy issues in the glaring lights of the media and of political debate, we cannot simply say, “you go your way, I’ll respectfully go mine.”

Since the issue of when to approve of Armed Conflict is so basic and central we certainly cannot say that it doesn’t matter. The very human tendency is to divide into camps, to rev up what the Bible calls a “party spirit,” in the same sense of Republican vs. Democrat, loyalties that quickly blind adherents and divide them into parties saying

- we are right, they are wrong
- we are thoughtful, they are pigheaded.
- we are faithful, they are copping out.

But, friends, if unity is our polar star, we cannot walk that path.

We cannot succumb to the worldly temptation to brush off those with whom we disagree. We have to find some other way.

One of the reasons our UCC Forums initiative here is so appealing is because it is a concrete answer to that question of that OTHER WAY looks like. Open Dialogue, sincere conversation, in which you open yourself to another, and your partner does the same, can do wonders to tear down the walls that we have erected to keep ourselves safe from one another and the challenge that a drastically different worldview brings.

Dialogue can become a truly religious experience as we find ourselves for a time transcending the limits of our narrow, personal vision. We are able, if we are so blessed, to see for a time as our dialogue partner sees, to deeply imagine how he or she understands the particular issue at hand. This,

friends, take us way beyond talk; towards an experience of reconciliation first hand.

Those of you who have been married for a few years or more will know that when a new issue or event pops up in the news, you already know how your partner will react to it. You can accurately predict whether she'll be enthused or whether he'll be angered by the news.

Now, being married a while doesn't make you prophet. But it has opened you to another's world enough that you come to intuitively feel what means what here. With someone you love, that is a very good thing.

When we can reach that same state of understanding with someone that we would have previously pigeon-holed as an enemy, an idiot, or an opponent, then dialogue is much more than a good thing, it is a true blessing to the community. When real dialogue occurs even though the political divisions do not cease, the spiritual ones do. When I can affirm the integrity, the wisdom, the faithfulness of the person on the opposite side of the issue of when is armed conflict moral; when I can still love them, still ask God's blessing upon them, then the ministry of reconciliation is real, incarnated. The Apostle Paul said that through Christ:

2 Cor. 5:19 God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.

There is a camp in the northeast of our nation where each summer children from Palestine of Jewish families and children of Arab Palestinian families come to understand one another. The discussions are often hard and uncomfortable, but because of their commitment to hang in there together and wait for the moment of insight and understanding, eventually they typically come to understand the others' point of view. One hopes that these young people who have experienced reconciliation themselves firsthand, when they grew into positions of leadership back in Palestine, will be able to be ambassadors of peace there where it is so needed.

And speaking of struggles for peace, one of the great questions that American Christians are still asking ourselves as the upcoming national elections draw near is whether the U.S. should ever have gone to war in Iraq. Even with the benefit of hindsight, there still is no consensus, and that - I will assert- is largely because we've never come to any consensus as American Christians on the basic principles of when- if ever- resorting to Armed Conflict is moral.

But there is one aspect of that decision that our Disciples of Christ variety of the Christian faith impels us to lift up higher than perhaps any of our other denominational neighbors. It came to light in powerful way 6 years ago as our nation stood on that precipice of Armed Conflict with Iraq. President Bush announced 6 years ago today that war with Iraq may be unavoidable and that delay was not an option to keep a defiant Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from deploying weapons that we had been led to believe could cause "massive and sudden horror" for America. The President said:

"There's no negotiations. There's nothing to talk about."

I remember a sinking feeling that day as I read those words... that something important was already lost, that dialogue had died. For as the talking ceased, few Americans then truly understood what Saddam Hussein saw, what the Iraqi people saw. And the Iraqis likewise, were in the dark as to why America acts as she does. 6 difficult years later there has still been precious little real dialogue, real understanding, and the fighting still goes on and on.

My friends, as Christians, the one thing that should be utterly clear to us is that in every instance, but most especially in those times when relationships are strained and fraying, the Christian spirit will always be striving to RECONCILE with friend and enemy alike, as ambassadors of the healing spirit of Jesus Christ.

Let us admit forthrightly that any artificial limits that we might place on that reconciling ministry are clearly our limits, not God's. For we claim as our Lord, as our Teacher and Leader, the One who even in the midst of His own dying on a cross sought reconciliation for others... "Father, forgive them..."

What a challenge that is for us to live up to!

It is embodied in the quote from Mahatma Gandhi, which goes

"You must be the change that you want to see in the world."

And our bulletin insert makes the same admonition in different form, a charge to each of us...

Become the Gift of Reconciliation.

Do you hear echoes of our 2 Cor. Passage as well, God entrusting the message of reconciliation to us, and through us?

I am convinced that our Disciples forbearers were absolutely right on this one. The claiming of our unity in Christ is not just a value among many for those who want to be faithful. Recognizing our essential unity; following the implications of our unity;

tearing down the walls that would divide us;
and letting the light of God shine forth from ALL God's children,
is the finest bearing of witness to the loving kindness of God that we could ever hope to offer.

Praise be to the Lord our God, who has made us,
who has made us one through the gift of reconciliation, and
who now calls us to share the challenge of it, the wonder of it, with all the world!

Amen!^{iv}

ⁱ But it is time for confession, friends. Our Disciples predecessors in faith never intended for us to worship like this, in fact, with our own denominational symbol, our own denominational structures and principles. We were supposed to be the vanguard of a new way of being church in America that swept away the schismatic division into hundreds of separate competing denominations! We were supposed to be leaving denominational labels and habits behind, just as a butterfly sheds its chrysalis, and we were then to float free and easy with all other Christians on the wind of the spirit of God.

ⁱⁱ Matt. 26:52

ⁱⁱⁱ Matt. 5:38

^{iv} Please note that as is often the case (and in this instance in spades!), the sermon as delivered (which you may listen to in the audio file elsewhere on this website) is substantially different from what is written here.