

Finding Unity in the Midst of Our Diversity

A reflection on Martin Luther King Jr. Day
and the Inauguration of Barack Obama

Ezekiel 37:15-28 1 Corinthians 1:4-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
January 18, 2009

There are moments in life that sometimes call for a special and specific response or reflection. Moments, for instance, when preaching on a pre-assigned lectionary biblical passage just doesn't do justice to the urgency of the events currently taking place in the world around us.

Those include the kind of moments that many would consider historic in nature. Unfortunately, they are often moments of great local, national, or international tragedy. And several days ago, I realized that the confluence of events that will be taking place this week also deserve a special and specific response and reflection. But instead of being tragic in nature, they are a cause for much hope for many people, locally, nationally, and internationally.

I'm referring, of course, to the **Inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States** on Tuesday of this week. Adding to the impact of this event, is the celebration tomorrow of the life, ministry, and civil rights work of **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** And there is a third event happening this week that most of you probably are not familiar with. Every year, the third week of January is designated as the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**. It is a worldwide event that includes not only Protestant denominations, but also the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

It is the combination of these three particular events at this particular time that I thought warranted a sermon on the crucial importance of finding unity in the midst of our diversity.

Unity can be defined as the state or quality of being in accord and in harmony; having a singleness of purpose or action; of being joined as a whole.

Whenever I address the issue of unity from a biblical perspective I like to talk about Paul's letter to the church that he founded in Corinth, Greece. And **given the ever-increasing polarization of religious and political factions in this country, Paul's call to unity is just as timely and relevant today as it was to that Corinthian congregation.** But as we are all too aware, even within the church,

unity is a concept much easier to talk about than to put into practice – hence 2000 years of quarrelling and divisiveness within the Christian church.

When the Apostle Paul first founded a Christian congregation in Corinth in 51 CE it was a city that was considered to be perhaps the most diverse city in history up to that point. That first Christian congregation in Corinth was uncharacteristically diverse as well, made up of an uncommon mix of people: very poor to very wealthy, slave to free, men and women, converts from both Jewish and pagan Gentile traditions.

Within a short couple of years, however, Paul learned of that congregation's deteriorating situation. He had received personal reports that the folks in the church were quarrelling. Divisiveness led to the formation of cliques and factions, each claiming their particular identity to be superior to the others. In response, Paul wrote them a letter, which we know as First Corinthians. At the heart of this letter is the issue and question: **How could they find unity in the midst of their diversity? This ancient Corinthian question has become one of our most pressing modern questions.**

How can we find unity in the midst of our diversity as Christians throughout the world; as Presbyterians in this country and in this presbytery; as a church in this city, and even as members and friends of this very congregation?

And now, on the eve of Martin Luther King Day, and the eve of the eve of the Inauguration of Barack Obama, we should also address a similar question: **How can we find unity in the midst of our diversity as a nation?**

First, the Presbyterian part of this equation. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has become deeply embroiled with trying to answer: **How can we continue to live together as a denomination in the face of our differences?** This conflict was brought very close to home here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, for instance, when the Kirk of the Hills Presbyterian Church, the largest congregation in this presbytery, decided a couple of years ago that because of their ever-growing theological differences that *they could no longer live in unity* with our denomination. They chose, therefore, to leave the PC(USA) and affiliate themselves with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in America.

While there hasn't (nor will there be) anything like a mass exodus, more congregations may indeed choose to split away from their historical connection with our denomination.

This question of how can we continue to live together as a denomination was a primary question that was addressed recently by a national level **Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church.** Sadly, however, the final report and recommendations of that group, which were adopted by our General Assembly in 2006, has only seemed to cause more tension within our denomination.

Presbyterians, by the way, aren't the only ones embroiled in this struggle between conservative and progressive theological perspectives and practices. Some Episcopalians, in fact, have seemed to have taken the lead in finding ways to split their denomination.

The book of First Corinthians reminds us, however, that **divisiveness within the church is an age-old problem**. So perhaps we all need to hear again the words of the Apostle Paul in verse 10 of Chapter 1:

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.

I'd like to ask you to be thinking this week of how any of this may apply to your personal and family life, as well as to the life and ministry of this congregation. Let us also be thinking about how the Apostle Paul's call to unity pertains to our thoughts and behaviors as a society.

Now, **I wouldn't be honest if I didn't admit that my progressive understanding of theology and biblical interpretation informs my political philosophy**; and yes, I guess in turn my political philosophy has helped inform the understanding of my theological perspective as well. I say that as a way to preface my next few remarks. **Yes, I am among many (perhaps most) in this country who have been anxiously awaiting a change in our presidential administrations and the way our government goes about its business.** But I say that not just because the incoming president is more in line with my personal political and theological perspectives.

What I am perhaps most excited and hopeful about (and we will indeed have to wait and see if this transpires) is an increasing sense and actual experience of balance and unity in the midst of our very diverse nation. And what that means, from my perspective, is that there will be **a greater possibility that Barack Obama will serve more effectively as the President for ALL Americans, and not take such ideologically polarizing positions that the former administration has taken.**

But hear closely what that statement entails. Yes, I have been among those who have often found myself railing against religious fundamentalists and the Far Right.

Yet, if those of us who consider ourselves to be theologically and socially progressive, and relate more to the Far Left, merely use the same tactics of alienation, exclusion, and even demonization of those who disagree with our views, then we really aren't becoming part of the solution to finding unity.

In other words, how can we better find ways to disagree without being so disagreeable? How can we learn to respect our differences and not take on the judgmental attitude that states, "You can either agree with my opinion, or be wrong." I've actually seen that line on a T-shirt.

And though folks at both ends of the political spectrum have found things to be concerned about, I have found that a great majority of Obama's

decisions up to this point, including those whom he has chosen to participate in his Inaugural events, have indeed been made with a striving for unity in mind. And I don't doubt that he has been, and will, use his faith to help inform his approach to governing. And I hope he does.

Therefore, **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.**

If I had the opportunity to personally speak directly with Barack Obama, 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 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. **It is a highly evocative metaphor for divided Christians, and for a 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 heterosexual, the other homosexual.
 One rich, one poor.
 One educated, the other uneducated.
 One North, the other South.
 One Tulsa, the other Oklahoma City.
 One Sooners, the other Longhorns...

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.

I truly believe that in the sight of God we are already one. What will it take for us to understand and recognize this as well?

So with all this in mind as we enter into this truly exciting and 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 future that lies ahead.

Amen.

Resources:

Resources for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 2009