

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Charles M. Cary
Sermon: "Questions People Ask VI: The Problem and Promise of Church Unity"
August 13 2017
Psalm 133; Ephesians 4: 1-6

Bill Tupper asks what I hear as an open-ended question for today's sermon. What's the status of our efforts in church unity? He remembers a time when a Roman Catholic would be unwelcome and uncomfortable stepping foot into a Protestant church and vice versa. Dr. Louis Pizzarello – a native of Southampton and active member of the Catholic Church in Westhampton Beach, describes a time when – as a member of Southampton's only Scout troop meeting in this church, nuns would warn him not to accept any religious teaching! There were walls which prevented us from worshipping in one another's buildings. One of the pastors at Westhampton refused to officiate the wedding of the daughter of an active member because she was marrying a Catholic boy. Her father will never forgive him. Yes, I know it worked the other way around. Ironically – the one who ended up officiating was Father Dee McGann – who tied the knot in the rectory office. Growing up in the south I heard dire predictions about the Catholicism of John F. Kennedy and how that disqualified him. One whom I respect declared that she wouldn't vote for him because he was Catholic, and if elected the Pope himself would end up running the country (as if he didn't have his hands full leading the Vatican!).

We've come a long way since the generation of suspicions, and a generation of extremes. In this church you have housed an ecumenical youth group nurturing the spiritual lives of Catholics, United Methodists, Episcopalians, along with Presbyterians. Disrespecting no one – the emphasis was on character formation and positive values – open-mindedness, and mutual respect. The old strategy of recruitment and persuasion of the superior church was largely overcome – in the interest of serving the greater good. Woe be it unto us – if we permit religious differences to confuse young people in youth group or Vacation Bible School. After all, there are many more things we hold in common – than divide.

We have come a long way from the days of finger pointing. In the early 1970's – the entire religion faculty of DePaul University taught their classes at Presbyterian McCormick Seminary. I was privileged to study the Gospel of Mark with Fr. John Dominic Crossan – a Bible scholar whose only problem was his rapid-fire lecture style. Once I asked him to slow down –so I could make sure I understood him! We've come a long way. Stephen Colbert taught Sunday catechism in New Jersey where he and his family worshipped. Lady Gaga, who pushes our buttons sometimes, while other times is as good an entertainer as anyone – is a proud graduate of Sacred Heart Catholic Schools in New York. The degree of openness amongst the churches is welcome. It comes from a more frequent study of Scriptures. It also comes from life-changing revolutions in the churches –and more frequent encounters on the mission field. The world has become smaller. Presbyterian missionaries would often return from their work to declare: "The division of the Body of Christ into so many denominations hinders our work – We can do better."

The Holy Scriptures call for unity. Today's Psalm (133) is the shortest of all. Its core theme is the catalyst for Bill Tupper's question: "How very good and pleasant is it when kindred live together in unity. It is like Aaron being consecrated with Holy Oil! How good it is when the people of God live as brothers and sisters – not simply with those who are like us – but with all."

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians anticipates Bill's question: "There is one body and one Spirit. Just as you were called to the one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one Baptism: one God and Father of all, who is above all – and through all and in all!" The one who labors for church unity labors not in vain!! Remember it was not Martin Luther's intention in 1517 to start a new church! He simply wanted to return the church he loved to its rightful practices – free of corruptions, and honest in its beliefs. I am a better Christian because of my Roman Catholic grandmother. I say my prayers when I do – remembering her firm direction. When she insisted on going to mass prior to our road trip because someone needed to pray for our safety – it infuriated my father, who preferred an earlier start. Yes – sometimes the unity comes because of the give and take of kindred spirits. We never left until grandmother had been to Mass – no matter how often my father said: "Grace – the Priest will forgive you for not making it this one time!" You know who prevailed. Her health was not so good- but her spiritual practices were as disciplined as ever. I am a better Christian today because of my Roman Catholic grandmother's influence. I am a better Christian because of evangelicals I have met. I am a better Christian because I have been a friend of the Rev. Jack King – a United Methodist of the highest integrity. I am a

better Christian due to the influence of students I have taught – students from all over the world. I am a more thoughtful Christian because I have rubbed shoulders with those who put their faith on the line for others. I am a more realistic follower of Jesus having heard and supported missionaries in the struggle to heal. One doctor from Malawi – needed an autoclave to sterilize her instruments. I heard her story and said – that’s something our church can make possible. She chuckled as she told us – we have to be smart when we use it – so often the power goes out!

You are a better Christian due to what you have learned from Christians of another culture – another language – another church. There is someone who helped shape your faith, who helped you see the image of Christ in you – in another. Perhaps it wasn’t a Presbyterian – that does not matter. We are not restricted as God is not restricted to working in one kind of church!

I have talked about the promises of church unity – about its blessings. There are still issues or problems. There are still obstacles to overcome. I dream of the day when we can participate in one another’s Sacraments. Not long ago I attended a farewell Mass for the Monsignor at Immaculate Conception Parish, crowded beyond belief. He was beloved and respected by all in the community – in particular by fellow clergy. The service was energized. The music soared. The Scriptures were accessible and read by members of his family. Bishop Murphy, then Bishop of Long Island, was there to preside at the Sacrament. In his defense he very nicely asked those of us non-Catholics in the house not to partake. That he was praying for the day when we could overcome our long standing divisions and reunite around the Table of the Lord. I was not surprised. The Bishop was sincere – and cared enough to make an awkward situation less awkward and more human. We remained in our seats as everyone else went forward to share the bread and cup. In so many other ways we are united. We can hear the Gospel together. We can pray together. We can make our offerings together. We can worship the Lord together. Some day – we will be able to enjoy communion in each other’s congregations. Some day – we will exclude no one and the table of the Lord will be the catalyst for unity – rather than a reminder of our divisions, the distance we have yet to go!

Meanwhile – we –with a capital “W” – are still one step removed from Psalm 133 and Ephesians 4 – “How good it is when kindred dwell in unity: There is one body and one spirit – just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism – one God and Father of All! Who is above all, and through all, and in all.”

God knows there is a long list of barriers to the unity of God’s people. There are barriers to church unity many of which are related to the barriers to interfaith unity. Our biases often fuel these barriers and make it hard to relate to other people as human beings, made in the image of God. Yet as someone once said: Religious ignorance is the cause of so many problems. Religious understanding will foster their solutions!

Back to Father Dee McGann. He became a trusted friend over the years. A scratch golfer – I avoided him on the golf course. An excellent preacher. Yes – I used to sneak into Mass – to hear his meditation. He co-officiated a wedding service at Westhampton Presbyterian – Chris Carter and Yola Kotowich, and offered consolation at several funerals. He practiced the meaning of Psalm 133 and Ephesians 4 even if his denomination could not. He knew what we all should know – the key to church unity – to interfaith unity – is our ability to love others regardless of their station in life –regardless of their ability to love us back!

Dee’s health declined and he spent time in Westhampton Care Center. Confined to a wheelchair, kidney problems, and injuries from his days as a rugby player which only worsened with age. I could tell one day when I saw him in the hall –that he was in great pain. But, not so much that he could not do something I will never forget. “Chuck” he said “would you please bless me?” “Me bless you?” I hesitated. Maybe all the differences in our churches were clamoring – insisting I say “no”. He held my hand- put his head down – and once more said – insisting- “Would you bless me!?” To which I said in my best effort to be Christ-like: “May the Lord bless you and keep you.”

Bill Tupper has done us all a favor asking about church unity. With God’s help we have come a long way. We still have a long way to go.

Whenever we overcome our differences to show forth our unity in Christ – the world and church tilt closer to what they are supposed to be. And all is well. All is well indeed. All manner of things is well. Amen.