

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Unity, not Unanimity

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Words have meaning, despite what some post-modern philosophers might suggest. And given the enormous power of words, we really should be more careful with them. There is no realm in which this concept is more important than in our current political realm. Political leaders of all stripes like to call for unity when they actually mean unanimity.

From Democrat leaders the call for unity is actually a call for unanimity around civility rather than real action. For them unity didn't mean unity with those suffering in Gaza or those who support an end to that genocide; no, unity meant abandoning the least and lowly in order to "reach across the aisle" to court conservative voters. Unanimity around incrementalism and protecting the status quo was lurking behind those calls of unity.

From Christian nationalist and Republican leadership unity means conformity to a particular brand and interpretation of Christianity. This "unity" disguises all sorts of required and disgusting unanimity around in-groups and out-groups, often denying the very humanity of those they don't consider "true Christians" or "true Americans." This has led to an enforced unanimity today in which one cannot even use words like "women," "disabilities," "transgender," or "BIPOC" in governmental studies or research.

Are you beginning to see the problem with confusing unity for unanimity in our political realm? Since most Americans don't have the time or capacity to

really parse political statements in order to keep an eye on our leaders, is it any wonder that so many of them have started to use language to manipulate (aka propaganda)? Our media systems have been doing it for decades too. Using words interchangeable when they really aren't. Next time you hear a political leader call for unity, ask yourself if what they really mean isn't unanimity.

So what is the difference between unity and unanimity and why is it important? Unity is not unanimity. Unanimity does not allow for difference. Unity not only allows for difference it requires it as well. And it is that unity that Jesus is praying for in our passage from John. And it is that unity that leads to the jailer being converted in our Acts reading too.

Unity describes a web of interconnected beings, in which the diversity of individuals strengthens the whole. Jesus prays that we be one as he and the Father are one. Miles of paper and oceans of ink have been spilled on how God the Father and God the Son are united but distinct in the doctrine of the Trinity.

This unity has a purpose, but it is not the rigid unanimity of so many other human institutions. The purpose of the unity Jesus is praying for is love. Verse 23 lays this out explicitly, "that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." and then in verse 26, "so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them."

The purpose of our unity is love. We are being sent out into the world, with God abiding in us through the Holy Spirit, in order to bear God's love to a world that desperately needs it. Our unity is grounded in the Way of Christ. And walking the Way of Christ means encountering other hurt, messy, sick, oppressed, confused, power-hungry, strange, people as Jesus did. He met

them where they were. He ate with them. He served them. He was honest with them. He loved them. He invited them into community, into unity.

Jesus did all this without demanding unanimity. Jesus loved others and all he asked in return was that those he loved be loving towards others too. Jesus served the needs of any he could, without payment or requirement, inviting those he served to serve those they could too. Jesus was even willing to learn and grow from those he encountered,¹ and he invites his followers to be willing to learn and grow too.

The direction of all of this unity is every outwards too. The unity Christ invites us to is not a closed off sort of unity, that rejects the world around it. No, the unity Christ calls us to is the sort of unity that is always welcoming and inclusive towards the world. And if we really follow the example of Christ we will find that the Way will drive our unity towards those who are suffering.

In Philippians, Paul encourages us to have the same mindset as Christ: “who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”²

The “oneness” or unity that Jesus prays for requires humility and perspective. And it will often lead to conflict. In particular, conflict with all those who seek enforced unanimity in the guise of unity. As theologians of the cross we call things what they are. Most leaders in our country right now want unanimity not unity. They seek to drown out difference and diversity. But creation was made beautifully diverse by a wise and loving Creator. Unity

¹ c.f. Matthew 15:21-28 (NRSVUE)

² Philippians 2: 5-8 (NRSVUE)

has been prayed for by a wise and loving Redeemer. And unity will arise from the work of a wise and loving Sanctifier.

May we seek unity with God. The sort of unity that would have us singing and praying while sitting in prison. May we seek unity with one another. The sort of unity that is concerned with the lives of those around us, especially those who are suffering or in danger. May we seek unity that prizes diversity for the sake of healthy communities. May we seek unity grounded in love. And may we **not** seek unanimity. Amen.