

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2020

(Read the prayers and scripture readings and recite the Creed aloud, even if you are by yourself, in order to hear with the ears each one. Sing or read the final hymn aloud.)

Prepare for worship: Sit in silence or with soft music for a few moments

Call to Worship:

Surely the Presence of the Lord (UMH 328)

Surely the Presence of the Lord is in this place;
I can feel his mighty power and his grace.
I can feel the brush of angels' wings,
I see glory on each face;
surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

- Lanny Wolfe

Centering Words:

When all seems to be lost, God is most near to us. (*Abingdon Worship Annual, 2020, 179*)

Affirmation of Faith: Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; the third day he rose from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Prayer of the Day:

Almighty and all-loving God, through your Son Jesus Christ you have reconciled the world to yourself. Help us now to be reconciled with one another, that again we might dwell in the warmth of your love. Inspire us with your Holy Spirit to put aside the cloak of pride and put on Christ, that we might forgive and be forgiven; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray: (*UM Book of Worship, 489*)

The Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Prayer of Illumination:

Open our ears that we may hear and our hearts and minds that we may receive your word
O Lord our rock and redeemer.

(After each reading take two to three minutes to reflect upon the meaning of the passage to you today.)

Epistle Reading Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32

Old Testament Reading Genesis 45: 1-15

Gospel Reading Matthew 15: 21- 28

Special Music

Psalm 133

Sermon *Living Together in Unity*

Hymn:

Bind Us Together (TFWS-2226)

Bind us together, Lord,
bind us together with cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord,
bind us together, Lord,
bind us together in love.

There is only one God,
there is only one King;
there is only one body,
that is why we sing,

Bind us together, Lord,
bind us together with cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord,
bind us together, Lord,
bind us together in love.

-Bob Gillman

Benediction:

We are bound to all people with cords that cannot be broken, the cords of God's love. Go forth living in the bonds of God's love for all. Amen.

Response:

God Be With You till We Meet Again (UMH 673)

God be with you till we meet again;
by his counsels guide, uphold you,
with his sheep securely fold you;
God be with you till we meet again.

Psalm 133

When my mother went into the nursing home, she had many Bibles that she could not take with her. Of course, what do you do with Bibles? You send them to the brother who is a preacher. I discovered that Mom made many notes and underlined many passages in her Bibles. As I was looking through one, I came across this note above Psalm 133, "I like this one."

I like this one too. I would like to think we all like this Psalm. The NRSV entitles this Psalm: *The Blessedness of Unity*. It is one of the Psalms of Ascents, Psalms 120-134. These are Psalms that people would sing as they made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festivals. Psalms they would sing as they ascended Mt Zion, to the temple.

This Psalm has such wonderful images. It begins with kindred living together in unity giving rise to the image of a family gathering, Thanksgiving or Christmas, where for at least a little while we may put aside differences and sit together. It evokes the image of a family walking together and singing as they go up to the temple.

Then, like they often do in the movies when the focus is on a single person or small group of people, the camera pulls back showing that the person or group is part of a large crowd. The camera keeps pulling back until it shows a whole city, then the nation and finally the whole earth.

As the Psalmist refers to the dew of Mt Hermon, which is some 200 kilometers north of Jerusalem the "camera" pulls from the family group to include all of the nation of Israel. The dew from Mt Hermon would feed streams which would then flow southward to Mt Zion. You have this image of streams of people from all directions coming to Mt Zion to worship God, singing this or one of the other Songs of Ascents. Take a minute and just imagine people from all over the world coming to one place to worship God. It is good and pleasant.

It is like oil on the head. You have been walking all day in the hot sun. You are going through the wilderness where there is no shade. Your skin is dry and chapped from being in the sun and wind. You are hot, dry, and dusty. Someone pours soothing oil over your head. Not a drop or two but so much that it runs down your head, neck and down the collar of your clothes. Soothing, cooling, oil poured over your head, neck and down your clothes: cooling the burned skin, soothing the dry skin, separating the dirt from the skin. It feels so good and pleasant.

Oil that not only cleanses but consecrates. Like the oil which consecrated Aaron as the priest, so does this oil set us apart as God's chosen. Oil that takes away the dirt of sin and cleanses us to be God's. Oh, how good and pleasant that would be.

People coming together in unity. Coming together to worship God. All coming together. How good and pleasant that would be.

Yeah right, but that will never happen. That is some impossible dream. Something we may imagine like the old John Lennon song, *Imagine*. Yea, we may imagine people living life in peace, but it will never happen.

Look at the world. We are too divided. There are 196 different nations on this planet. There are that many different independent political entities according to the United Nations. Within those different nations there are the different ethnicities. Here in the US we have Native American, Euro American, African American, Latino, Hispanic, Asian American and others. Then we have the subsets within these categories.

Then there are all the different languages. There is some 6,000 different languages and dialects, some spoken by billions, some spoken by as few as eight people worldwide. Sometimes we don't even understand those that speak the same language.

My nephew taught English in Puerto Rico for two years. He said that the language problem was not in his students understanding English but in his understanding their Spanish, for his was classical Castilian and that was not the Spanish they spoke in Puerto Rico. We can't understand each other even when we speak the "same" language.

Oh, then there is religion, so many different religions. Then there are sects or denominations, whatever you want to call them, within each religion. We have Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Church of Christ, Orthodox and some others within couple of miles from this Church. So many different ways in which people view, worship, and relate to God.

Then there are all the other divisions we have: political affiliations, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, where we live- rural, urban, suburban. We can probably find enough ways in which to divide that we can all be in our own little bubble. So, to live together in unity? Dream on brother, it will never happen.

Yet, I remember playing with the Black sharecropper's kids growing up and not thinking that they were different. They were kids I could play with. We played together without noticing our differences.

When Kay and I went to Israel in 2017, I had to write a paper of my experience to get credit for my cross-cultural experience. My paper was entitled *One Land, Two People, Three Religions* for there is in one land-Israel- populated by two people-Israeli and Palestinian- and three religions- Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Much of our discussions dealt with the conflict in the country between the different groups, where even Mt Zion, the holy hill upon which those that sang this Psalm marched up, was claimed by all three religions, and became a point of conflict.

So, to think of people coming together in unity is something that is too good and too pleasant for humans to experience. It will never happen. Or can it?

During our trip to Israel, we went to Christmas Mass at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. In many Catholic and Orthodox traditions, Christmas is celebrated at the end of the Christmas season, Epiphany, January 6. During the mass the liturgy and scriptures were read in six different languages. At the passing of the peace I passed the peace of Christ to Kay, then to the Palestinian woman on my left, to the German priests in front of me, to the French and African nuns on the other side of Kay, then to my Seminary classmates sitting behind me which included a gay couple. I felt a warmth, a power, that, yes, all these different people can come together in unity.

After the service, we went out to Manger Square where there was a huge parade of drums and pipes and horns, with all the different leaders from all the different orthodox traditions walking past. Above the cacophony of the parade there came the Muslim call to prayer from the nearby mosque. All these people, even two different religions, receiving a call to praise and pray to God. We can celebrate coming together in unity.

Ah, but that was one brief mystical moment you may say. Yes, it was. But the reality of all people living together in unity may not be as farfetched as we may think.

Later in the trip we went to Ibillin in Galilee where we heard Elias Chacour, the Malkite Archbishop of Galilee, who built in Ibillin the only school in Israel that admits Christians, Muslims, and Jews. He has been a force for peace and reconciliation in Israel. He made two points in his lecture.

The first is that Christians, Muslims and Jews do not need to learn how to live together in Israel but to remember how they lived together. Before the War, before 1948, Christians, Muslims, and Jews all lived together in the land then called Palestine in peace. It was not until after WWII with the creation of the nation of Israel that there was conflict in the land.

The other point Chacour made that we need to remember is what unites us. We need to remember that what unites all people- people of all races, people of all nationalities, people of all languages, people of all religions, people of all sexual orientations, people of all political persuasions- is what we all are at the core of our being. To remember what we are when we are born.

According to the Bible we, all people, are children born, that is created, in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). The Image of God does not mean that we look like God, obviously, but that we are born, created from the very essence of God which is love. Most are born out of an act of love.

We will never know how good and pleasant it is to live in unity unless we remember. Remember that we can live together in peace. Remember that we all are kindred created in the image of God. Forgetting all of the barriers we humans have created to divide, and remember God created us to be united together by what we are made from, God's love.