

## Love Brings Us Together Sunday, 3/21/21

Show me someone without hope, and I'll show you someone who is sad, mad, depressed, and perhaps desperate. Hope is as essential for living as the air we breathe. Why? Because hope gives us a reason to keep walking from the present moment to the future, regardless of the past and the present. Hope is inherently a future word, a trust that a tomorrow is possible that we can't see today, a tomorrow that's worth striving for and enduring any hardships required to get there.

During the last year of the pandemic, people have placed their hope in a great many things with varied results: vaccines, masks, luck, the CDC, testing, their quarantine pods, and a whole host of coping strategies for marking time until the pandemic is over. Some have done more binge watching of television shows. Some have taken up new hobbies. I've been doing more hiking. In a sense, it doesn't really matter how you've done it, as long as you've managed to find something to look forward to, a reason to get out of bed and face the day with something more than a resigned willingness to endure for 24 hours.

Everyone needs something to look forward to, because everyone is experiencing the present, burdened by something in the past, and uncertain about what lies in the future. This is simply the human condition, and regardless of whether it's a pandemic, a recession, the winter weather, or a fight with a friend, we all face circumstances in this life that challenge our hope. So whatever it is that we put our hope in, we'd best pick something that's virus proof, earthquake proof, polar-vortex proof, and idiot proof, lest we find ourselves clinging to something hollow and worthless when we most need it.

In his letter to the Church at Ephesus, Paul writes that we can all find a sure and glorious hope for the future, not in the gimmicks of this world that we tend to lean on, but in the one Church of Jesus Christ. By "Church," I don't mean a particular place, time, style, or denomination. I mean the Church defined by it's one Lord of Jesus Christ, whose one Body we form together and in whom we share one faith and one baptism by the one Holy Spirit. If we are to share in any hope that endures for eternity, it's that one hope offered by our one God, "who is over all, in all, and living through all."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:6. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

In *Love is the Way*, Bishop Michael Curry lays out his case for what can make such unity possible, what he calls “The Real E Pluribus Unum,” meaning, “out of many, one.”<sup>2</sup> The challenge is daunting, because we all recognize that while there may be one Body, there are certainly a great many individuals in the Church, with many different stories, different callings, different giftings, and even different understandings of God, the Bible, and the Church. Never mind that the whole earth is divided into an immeasurable number of splinter groups of self-interest. If the Church can’t represent a united way of love while claiming to follow the Lord of love, how legitimate can our witness really be, to each other and to the world?

We say that there is one baptism, and yet there are some who are refused baptism because of their same-gender or transgender sexual orientation. We say there is one Church, but by and large churches in America still tend to self-segregate along racial and socio-economic lines. As Bishop Curry described the dilemma faced by the Episcopal Church in 2015 regarding the churches’ understanding of human sexuality, “If we, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, of the God who is love, could not find a way to live together in peace, even when members were in real disagreement, who could?”

Paul leads off chapter four of Ephesians with humility. There’s a reason we keep coming back to humility. Humility is the bedrock of love, without which genuine love is impossible. Humility is what allows us to consider others as better than ourselves. And while pridefulness might be the opposite of humility, one of its close cousins is the poison of contempt, which Bishop Curry suggests is the first thing we need to leave behind if we are to have any hope of finding unity among our differences. Here’s what he writes: “Contempt is the belief that the person who disagrees with you isn’t just wrong, but worthless. It’s a killer when it comes to marriages, they’ve found, and it’s no better for any other human relationship. Try making meaningful progress when contempt controls the discussion. It’s like trying to grow plants in radioactive soil.”<sup>3</sup>

When contempt for another lives in our hearts, it’s a symptom of a larger problem. Something is preventing us from allowing God’s one peace, one Spirit, and one hope to bind

---

<sup>2</sup> Bishop Michael Curry. *Love Is the Way*, p. 185. Avery (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 188.

us together. We can try all we like to be humble, gentle, patient, and loving, but without the one Spirit of God bearing those fruit of love in our lives, we're always going to fall short. Yes, we should definitely make every effort to avoid bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, slander and one of my all-time favorites of Paul's phrases, "all types of evil behavior."<sup>4</sup> That covers a lot of ground, right? But we're never going to go beyond what's humanly possible to embrace the supernatural way of love without surrendering control to the Holy Spirit. Kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness- those all comes in abundance through the sacrificial love and Spirit of Jesus.

That surrender requires the deepest kind of humility, demonstrated to us first in the example of Jesus. I'm reading next from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi in the second chapter, the famous "kenosis" passage, which simply means, "self-emptying" or "self-giving." I'm starting with verse 1 in the New Living Translation.

**{Read Philippians 2:1-11 NLT}**

If you were listening carefully, you might have heard some of the same themes from Ephesians echoed in this passage: Unity and fellowship in God's Spirit; tenderheartedness toward one another; humility; and self-giving instead of selfishness, looking out for the interests of others. How can anyone really love like that? Surely not just by emulating the example of Christ, who was both man and God. No, we also need the supernatural power that comes when we allow the Spirit of Christ to rule our hearts and guide our hearts, hands, feet, and mouths. It's only when we empty ourselves of all that isn't Jesus that we make room for more of God's Spirit, which in turn allows us to give ourselves in love completely to God and others in the way Jesus gave himself for us. That's the high-stakes proposition of Christ's way of love. If we want to experience a fullness of love in this life, then we really do have to be all-in with the Jesus part.

Let's raise the stakes by making this more personal. What could our church look like, Buffalo United Methodist Church, if Philippians 1 and Ephesians 2 became our rule of life together? What would our ministries look like? What would our meetings look like?

---

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4:31. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

Don't misunderstand me, many acts of love are shared by the members of this church every day, with each other and the communities we live and work in, and we can give thanks to God for them. But even in a congregation like ours that's been known for unity, there are things dividing us in these days. The seismic shocks experienced in the Episcopal Church in 2015 are now at our doorstep at last, even if COVID has caused us to kick the General Conference meeting down the road a year and a half. But make no mistake, we will be facing some difficult choices regarding what we say and do about human sexuality in our church, and no doubt there will be some who will choose to walk away. Some, in fact, have already done that- people representing both sides of the division.

I grieve for the lack of unity that division demonstrates to the world, and it seems to me that we're missing another one of those moments in history when we could right the ship of the Church and make more room for the Spirit of God. How will we handle those days when the delay is over and at last we're called to take a stand? I don't know, but I do believe the choice is ours. Will we choose the humble and self-giving way of Christ, or will we allow our differences to divide what the Spirit of God has made one?

Over the last four years, politics have divided this country like no other time before. Judging from the abundance of rhetoric, humility never had a chance as contempt took its place as the foundation of every political commentary. Sadly, the election hasn't changed that, with democrats and republicans continuing to demonize each other and independents wishing for a middle ground that's nowhere to be found. Our church is no different, comprised of people of all sorts of political persuasions. Surely even in politics, we're called as Christians to walk the way of love. Who's going to make the daring, self-giving political moves that will make possible loving relationships that honor God regardless of political opinion? Who will be the first to shelve the contempt? Will it be us?

Over the last year, the pandemic has divided our country and our church, sometimes as an expression of our politics, sometimes as a reflection of our age or our health, but perhaps based mostly on what we each of us perceives that we have to lose- either by resuming in-person ministries or delaying them. Regardless of what does or doesn't happen with COVID and the church building in the coming weeks and months, I believe that the way we treat each other in these days will have a profound impact on the future that we'll

inherit in the coming year. Will we let our self-interests and preferences drive our decisions and our treatment of each other, or will we be able to do what we've done before- agree to disagree in love, clinging to the bond of peace that makes us sisters and brothers in Christ. My bet is on that outcome, because I believe that the hopeful future that comes with that path is the one we all need and want.

Let's close with a sign of unity as we pray this unison prayer of love that I first introduced at the beginning of this worship series. Please join me in praying.

*Loving God, fill my heart with the love that you freely give. Make love my first and last thoughts. May I love others and freely give to them. Make my spirit a spirit of joy, happiness, and love for both my friends and my enemies. Help me love abundantly as you have loved me. Amen.*

Please take some time now to reflect on how you will be an agent of unity for God. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer.



**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**  
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com