

Sermon for January 22, 2017 (Epiphany 3, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Psalm 27:1,5-13; Matthew 4:12-23

Title: No Divisions Among You!

One Sunday morning, a mother went into her son's bedroom and began to wake her son. "George! It's time to wake up", she said.

George groaned and mumbled back, "I don't want to get up. I'm tired!"

"But George, you have to get up! It's Sunday, and we can't be late for church!"

He replied: "I don't want to go to Church!"

The mother persisted: "George, it's Sunday, and you have to go to Church!"

"I don't want to go."

"But why not?" she asked.

"Because, I hate it!" George complained.

The mother was a bit shocked. "You hate it? But why?"

"Because it's stupid: the sermons are boring, the music puts me to sleep, the people are annoying, and the clergy don't like me."

"Oh George, come on. It's not that bad. Now please, get up, or we will be late!"

"I told you, I am not going!", he insisted. "Give me one good reason why I should go!"

To which his mother replied, "Well, George, first of all, you ARE the bishop."

OK, church is NOT that bad, right?! I mean, I LOVE the church!

I happen to think that I have the best job in the world, being able to work in the church.

But dealing with people is challenging stuff! Let's be honest: right back at the very beginning, even St. Paul was pulling out his proverbial hair over the people in the church in Corinth.

"Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Corinthians 1:13).

With these scathing rhetorical questions, that great missionary apostle probes the consciences of his hearers there in the city of Corinth, hoping to shame them into a change of mind and heart and action.

What was he aiming for? Only one of the most elusive things on earth! **UNITY.**

But is that even possible? Is unity possible within ANY group of human beings?
Is unity possible within the church?

Well, at least, let there be no question about this point: the Bible calls us, as far as we are able, to live in unity with all of those who are in the Body of Christ.

Let there be no doubt at all that God desires and longs for unity among those who have been baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

You can hear that divine inspiration behind Paul's passionate call in this letter: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement – be in agreement! – and that there be no divisions among you – without any divisions at all! – but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor. 1:10).

United in ONE mind and ONE purpose! With NO divisions among you.

That IS the goal, that is God's master plan...but is it just a pie in the sky dream?
Is this another utopian fantasy? Something that will never be achieved on earth?

I mean, is it possible, really and honestly, to have unity?

It's hard not to be pessimistic when we see divisions among the church in Corinth within the first few years of their existence! And this church community was founded by the apostle Paul himself!
Yet they didn't get it! They did not understand!

And if THEY failed to understand, how can we actually expect to do any better?

In our day, when there are something close to 40 THOUSAND Christian denominations in the world, what can we possibly expect when it comes to real unity in the church?

My friends, we HAVE to ponder these questions today.

On one hand, we have all just witnessed profound signs of deep divisions and conflicts present in American society today, considering the historic inauguration on Friday and the historic marches yesterday all around the nation – and all around the world.

We are not immune to these things. All of those divisions out there in the world are present right here this morning as well.

In addition to this, these questions are timely because we ALSO find ourselves currently in the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. In case you have no idea at all what that is, this Week of Prayer happens each year during an eight-day span of time between two important commemorations of the church calendar: The Confession of St. Peter on January 18, and the Conversion of St Paul on January 25.

Can you see the symbolic framework of this eight-day cycle of prayer? Peter, of course, is remembered as the first Bishop of Rome, and so the Roman Catholic Church claims him as their founder.

And it was Peter’s confession to Jesus that “you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16) which stands as the central claim of the Gospel.

Remembering this confession of Peter marks the beginning of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and it concludes when we remember the Conversion of St. Paul whose letters served as the primary inspiration for the Protestant Reformers.

So these two commemorations form what many see as a divinely-inspired set of bookends for a dedicated time each year in which all of the churches of the world are invited to pray, to study and to work toward the visible, actual unity of the Church.

Now, you should know that this effort toward unity in the Church is rooted deep within the very DNA of the Episcopal Church, and within all Anglicans. Just look at our printed guide, The Book of COMMON Prayer! The whole idea is for us to come together and pray together, no matter what else might divide us.

In fact, I want you to pick up one of those Books of Common Prayer which you will find around you, and turn to page 876.

In the Historical Documents, you will find (on page 876) a very important document which outlines precisely HOW we understand this unity within the church might be achieved – or at least, on what grounds it might be achieved.

This document is called The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral.

It was given birth at two conferences of Bishops: a meeting of the American House of Bishops in 1886 and a meeting of the international Anglican Bishops at Lambeth Palace in England in 1888.

For simplicity sake, please look at the Lambeth Resolution on page 877, which begins in this way: “In the opinion of this Conference, the following Articles supply a basis on which approach may be by God’s blessing made toward Home Reunion.”

Isn’t that a great name for the goal of Christian unity? Home Reunion.

Well, you’ll see FOUR essentials listed there as the basis for Home Reunion.

1. The Holy Scriptures as the ultimate rule and standard of faith.
2. The Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed as the statements of faith.
3. The two dominical Sacraments – baptism and communion – as necessary for each follower of Christ.
4. And the historic Episcopate as the means of leading and governing the Church.

What all of these bishops declared back in the 1880’s is this: if you want to boil everything down and figure out what the bare essentials are for a church to actually BE a church, then here you have it!

These 4 things are essential, but everything else is negotiable.

And for the sake of God’s dream, we MUST be willing to lay everything else aside so that unity, so that home reunion, might take place.

For this, my friends, we MUST pray, study and work.

Someone wise has said that if no one tells you that your dreams are impossible, then you are not aiming high enough!

Is unity within the Body of Christ an impossible dream?

Maybe. Possibly. Probably.

But perhaps that is exactly what makes it a GOD-sized dream, something only God can do.

Some other wise person has said that we should think globally, and act locally.

Besides the real work of praying for it, I have no idea about how to work toward Christian unity around the world. But I DO know how to work toward it right here!

Listen: if WE cannot stay together, then what hope is there for the world?

If we cannot put aside our egos and everything else that divides us and just love the neighbor sitting next to us in the pew – if we cannot at least start there, then what hope is there for the entire world?

Whether you love the new president or whether you are scared to death by him, the dream of God remains the same: Let there be no divisions among you, but be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

So how will you, my friends, pray and work toward the real unity of the Church, both here in our local context, and around the world?

As crazy and impossible as it may be, may God give us all grace to strive boldly toward that goal. Amen.