

The Love of Christ Compels Us

I was amused late this week by the responses, including my own, to one of those goofy, way-too-easy quizzes posted on Facebook. Over the picture of a cherubic, extremely Aryan looking child, the post announced, “If you can get 10/15 on this hymnal test, you must be Southern Baptist.” After I took it, I reposted, announcing proudly, “I aced it. But remember, I’m a recovering Southern Baptist.” Friend after friend, including some who are here this morning, also chimed in with a variation of “I got them all but I’m no Southern Baptist.” It would appear that for progressive Christians and secular folk these days, there’s no worse insult than being called a Southern Baptist.

It would be funny if it weren’t so sad. I remember a time when I was justifiably proud of being a Southern Baptist. Of course, the churches where I grew up and the seminary in which I was educated have either left the SBC or changed radically since those days. And that’s relevant today because I remember a time when one could be a Southern Baptist and still be a free-thinker, an ecumenist, even, dare I say it, kinda liberal. You see, the reason that I am an ecumenist today, the reason that I make sure we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity each year, is because of how I was educated as a Christian at Kirkwood Baptist Church, then a staunch member of the St. Louis Metro Baptist Association, the Missouri Baptist Convention, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Like most major American cities, the St. Louis area is and was home to adherents of a wide variety of faiths. When I was in junior high, Kirkwood Baptist ran a series of classes on Sunday evening on understanding other denominations. This was back in the days when you could count on attendance at Sunday evening worship services being robust, with nearly as many showing up for what was then called “Training Union” as came on Sunday morning for Sunday School. The denominations class was just one of many being offered and I remember it drawing about 10 youth and adults each week. We even went on at least one field trip: to sit in on a worship service at the local Christian Science church, which I remember as being deadly dull. But more importantly, I remember the theme of the class – that although we Baptists might be just a little closer to the New Testament model than some of these other groups, they were after all our brothers and sisters in Christ, that we were to respect them, learn from them, and love them.

It was, really, sort of a clincher for me. I’d already learned to appreciate the commitment of some of my classmates at school to their own brands of Christianity. I remember especially Mark Rand, my friend whose dad was a professor at Concordia Seminary in the Missouri Synod Lutheran tradition and who introduced me to “Jesus Christ Superstar,” and Eric Vogelsang, whose dad was the pastor of the local Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a denomination now known as the Community of Christ. In junior high and high school, I found myself a member of various informal ecumenical prayer groups. My most consistent acting partner in high school was my pal Katy Veazey, who once infuriated me by ditching the opportunity to act opposite me in that creaky old classic “Stage Door” by Edna Ferber and George S. Kauffman to instead perform the role of “Grace, an angel,” in her Episcopal church’s annual fête. Katy, more properly now Mrs. Katherine Wagner, still carries the ecumenical flag, doubling as parish secretary at her own St. Mark’s Episcopal and as school secretary for the Catholic parish down the street. And then when I was in college, I was invited to preach the chapel service one Sunday morning at Six Flags Over Mid-America, where I worked and one of

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the very few people who showed up to hear me was that cute little Catholic high school girl, Connie Eddens. Anybody know whatever happened to her?

I tell stories like this almost every year at this time to illustrate the fact that the ecumenical imperative runs deep in me. As proud as I am to be a Baptist, an AMERICAN Baptist, thank you, or as my pal Tim Phillips says, “a Martin Luther King Baptist,” I never forget that all who call on Christ Jesus are members of one body. We may have different gifts, we may have different ways of worshipping, we may “do church” in ways that seem antithetical, but we are called to unity, to cooperation, and to love. We are called, to take off from one of those old hymns, not just to love Jesus but to love one another, because he first loved us.

For those of you who’ve not heard me on the subject of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity before or for those of you who have gratefully relegated my annual remarks to the dustbin of history, a quick orientation might be in order. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity has been around for only a sliver of time in the history of the Church, initially promoted by an Episcopalian priest named Fr. Paul Wattson in 1898 at Graymoor in Garrison, NY, and ultimately adopted in 1968 by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Wattson’s Society of the Atonement continues to publish materials like our bulletin this morning and the study guide I mentioned earlier through their Graymoor Ecumenical and Interreligious Institute. The Society publishes additional material relating to the Week of Prayer on their website.

The origin of this material is different each year. The WCC and Pontifical Council collaborate to choose the Christian community of a different country to choose the theme and focus scripture for an upcoming year and to produce commentary articles on the scripture as well as articles describing the ecumenical context of their country and other materials. This year, in honor of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the country chosen was Germany, home of Martin Luther and his 95 theses. Although the churches in Germany have good relations, it is important for those of us in America to remember that bloody, devastating wars were fought in Europe in the name of Christ after the Reformation. What is now Germany was particularly hard hit and the history of that time is still vivid for many. As was reported by the Graymoor Institute: “After extensive, and sometimes difficult, discussions (which began in 2014), the churches in Germany agreed that the way to commemorate ecumenically this Reformation event should be with a Christustfest – a Celebration of Christ. If the emphasis were to be placed on Jesus Christ and his work of reconciliation as the center of Christian faith, then all the ecumenical partners of the (Lutherans) (the Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Baptists, Methodists, Mennonites and others) would agree to participate in the anniversary festivities.”

Not only did all of these groups agree to make the 500th anniversary of the beginning of their separation into a love fest, they took their theme from the work of the successor to Luther’s arch-enemy, the Pope. Again, from the Graymoor Institute: “Ultimately it was Pope Francis’ 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”) which provided the theme for this year, when it used the quote: “The Love of Christ Compels Us.”” The very idea that a group of German Christians, numerically dominated by Lutherans, should take positive inspiration from a quote by the Bishop of Rome lifts up the idea of Christian Unity in a way that would have been impossible not so very many years ago. And, in the time remaining to us, I

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want to explore that theme: that it is Jesus' self-giving love for us that compels us toward reconciliation with our separated sisters and brothers as well as with our Loving Creator.

Let's begin with Paul's words to the Corinthians. There is a good case to be made that our New Revised Standard Version misses the mark a bit with the opening of verse 14: "For the love of Christ urges us on..." If we look at other translations or, for those who are so inclined, the original Greek, the sense of the verb is far stronger than a mere urging. Christ's love for us should not act as a mere cheerleader in our lives but as a commander. Other versions use words such as "control, rule, overwhelm, leaves us no choice," and in the translation chosen by the World Council of Churches, "compel." Indeed, "overpower" is a common meaning for the Greek. Writing for the World Council of Churches, Fr. George Smiga of St. Mary Seminary in Ohio says, "Whatever translation choice is adopted, it is important to capture the strong, almost violent nature of this verb. Luke uses it to describe the fever that overwhelms Peter's mother-in-law and the fear that lays hold of the Gerasenes when they beg Jesus to leave their territory. With this in mind, translations such as "urges" or "guides" do not seem strong enough. Paul is expressing an overwhelming force that demands action. The love of Christ compels us to reconciliation."

Paul reinforces this idea of our compulsion toward reconciliation with a repetitive description of our marching orders later in the passage. In verse 18, he writes that God "has given us the ministry of reconciliation." In verse 19, that God is "entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." And in verse 20, Paul concludes, "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making (God's) appeal through us..." It is yet another example of a New Testament theme you have heard from me many times before. As the Body of Christ on earth, we, the Church, have assumed the mantle of Christ Jesus, taking on his mission to spread the Good News that God loves us all and that we are to love one another.

When we think of this calling in terms of ecumenism, the relationship between different denominations, we may think that we have a very different and much easier task than the Christians in Germany. We in America fled to this place to escape those bloody religious wars, after all, and we've never had anything like that here, right? I would suggest to you, however, that we may simply have changed the terms of engagement. Do you all know the word "polity?" It's defined as the form or process of a civil entity. In religious circles, "polity" is often used as the catch-all word for how we "do church;" that is, such matters as who gets to serve and receive communion, who gets to speak from which part of the sanctuary, who do we baptize, how do we choose leaders, and so forth. These are the kinds of questions that triggered the Thirty Years War in Europe, the burnings at the stake in England, and the massacre of Huguenots in France. But in America, our field of religious strife has shifted from polity to politics. No longer do we despise someone for their use of unleavened rather than leavened bread in the Lord's Supper or for the fact that they were baptized as an infant instead of as a professing believer. But bring a group of Christians who voted for Donald Trump together with a group of Christians who voted for Hilary Clinton and watch the fur fly!

What I believe Paul is saying to us this morning is that neither of these categories should uppermost in our mind as we interact with those whom God has put in our path. Neither politics nor polity should guide us – we must allow the love of Christ to overwhelm us, to compel us to

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reconciliation. Again, you have heard me say it time and again, but our most important mission in the world is to tell everyone, by our words and our deeds, that they are all beloved by God, forgiven and blessed. We make mighty poor ambassadors for love when we allow ourselves to fall into hatred. If you don't believe me, go back and reread that comic strip from Radio Free Babylon I put in your bulletins this morning.

In order to keep from falling into hate and division, we must allow the love of Christ to seize us, allow Jesus to compel us to reconciliation. Part of being reconciled is to love in return and we must learn to love those whom we may not hate, even those who are "so darned hatable." We cannot despise, disrespect, or discount any other human being no matter how much we may disagree with them. We must learn to see their point of view so that we can love them for who they are for only when we take that step can we reach true reconciliation.

In the most recent issue of "Sojourners Magazine," the Muslim American activist Eboo Patel, who often writes for that magazine, tells about an conversation he recently had with a friend who is a professor at the University of Illinois. Patel writes, "...he told me an interesting story about identity. The week before, he had needed to shift his 9 a.m. class to 8 a.m. because of a mid-morning appointment. He promised his students he'd bring in Panera to make up for dragging them out of bed so early. One of his students, a white kid from a rural area in Illinois, had asked, "What's Panera?" Everybody else in his highly diverse class knew what Panera was, he stated matter-of-factly, making that white student's distinctive experience all the more striking. "Shouldn't any campus diversity movement that takes identity seriously be open to her uniqueness?" he asked me."

Patel writes of how he initially laughed off his friend's question but later reconsidered. "In the weeks since Donald Trump was elected president, I've thought about that rural white student. The place she's from voted overwhelmingly for Trump. I wonder if she did. I wonder why I never wondered much about her before. The Trump movement, for all the destruction it has caused, has made a set of invisible Americans visible. Perhaps part of the reason they voted for him was to scream: *I exist too. I have experiences too. I have pain and pride too.* I don't know why these things never amounted to an "identity" in my mind before Nov. 9. I am glad I see this a little more clearly now."

Patel concludes, "Let me emphasize that I think the diversity movement on campuses *should* be concerned with Muslim minorities, refugee and immigrant populations, African Americans, women, and the LGBTQ community. I believe that welcoming these stories and affirming these experiences does not mean we have to ignore displaced factory workers, returned veterans, or white students from rural areas who have never heard of Panera. I believe the human heart and the American promise is wider than we ever imagined."

My sisters and my brothers, the love of Christ, the love which moved Jesus to die for us, that same love compels us to seek reconciliation for all and with all. We cannot, we dare not, reserve one group for our opprobrium and say, "Well, *those* people... they're just not capable, they just don't understand, they don't have the education, they don't have the genetics, they're just immoral, they're just *so darned hatable.*" Those are the very people that we are called to love the most, the ones to whom we are to be neighbors, even as the Samaritan was a neighbor to the

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Jew. Recalling Luke's usage of the Greek word for "compel" in his stories of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law and of the terror of the Gerasenes who saw the demoniac restored to his right mind, Fr. George Smiga writes, "If we could let Christ's love burn in us like a fever or seize us with the strength of terror, that love would demand and compel us to be reconciled with one another and thus reconciled to God."

Our brothers of Graymoor Institute wrote: "May the wellspring of God's gracious reconciliation overflow in this year's Week of Prayer, so that many people may find peace, and so that bridges may be built. May people and churches be compelled by the love of Christ to live reconciled lives and to scale the highest walls that divide!" May it be so. Thanks be to God, Amen.