

Praying and Working for Christian Unity

According to St. John's Gospel, in the hours Jesus spent just before his arrest, trial and crucifixion, he prayed for his disciples, "that they all might be one" (John 17:11). Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, outside the city of Jerusalem. He had just come from what we call, "The Last Supper". One of the disciples, Judas, had gone off into the night to tell the authorities where they could find Jesus. Peter, the leader of the disciples was asleep and soon to publicly deny his Lord three times. The rest of his close friends and disciples would abandon him.

When Jesus died hours later, he left no written document or organizational structure. It would take much time and the miracle of the Resurrection before his followers would make sense of his life and death. In time the books of our New Testament would be written and widely accepted as "The Word of God". And in time, the fledgling Christian community would come to differentiate itself from Judaism, and begin a remarkable expansion so that some three centuries later, Christianity would be the dominate religion of the Roman Empire.

Yet, Christians were never one. Not since the first night in the Garden. We have never been united. We have never been in complete agreement. And over the centuries, Christianity has developed into a patchwork quilt of hundreds and hundreds of expressions. Our diversity is a fact. Our conflict is historic and legendary. In the name of Jesus, we who call him Lord, have done terrible things, to other Christians, to Jews, to Muslims and to many others.

Just over 100 years ago, a grass roots effort to promote Christian Unity developed into an annual "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity". Originally promoted by the Graymoor Monastery in Garrison, New York, this week runs between the Feast of the Confession of Peter (January 18) and the Feast of the Conversion of Paul (January 25). Invoking the two great apostles of the Early Church, this week provides a structured, annual program of prayer and witness. The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church declared that prayer was "the soul of the ecumenical movement". Since 1967 the annual Week of Prayer has been co-sponsored by the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

One might ask, "So what?" Granted, it is a nice thing to do. We should be praying for Christian Unity and in particular, for one another. Yet truth be told, our congregations and denominations are in practical competition for the hearts, minds and souls of people. We don't think alike on issues. We certainly don't worship alike. And while there have been wonderful and encouraging signs of new found mutual respect and even cooperation among Christian denominations, we are a long way from presenting to the world a unified Christian faith. Often times, not far beneath the surface, we nurture old prejudices and hurts. And as much as we would like to at least be together in prayer, very few seem to be able to take the next steps which might bring us together around the Lord's Table, unless one group or another is willing to give up its own historic traditions and beliefs and accept those of the other group.

We are not one. But consider how we as Christians can be in fact a powerful force for good. Consider that if one would take all the 400 some Christian congregations in Cumberland County and add up how many people are members of our churches, we would be far and away the largest group in the county. We would have more schools, hospitals, retirement homes, shelters, and food pantries than any other organization, public or private. Collectively we would be the largest employer in the county. Our members' giving and our churches' contributions to the welfare of the community would dwarf the United Way voluntary giving. Yet, because Christians are not united, our witness and ministry and the impact for good that we have on our community is defused. Our duplication facilities is illogical and wasteful.

So, in this Week of Christian Unity, it is a very good thing for us to lay aside our histories, disagreements, agendas, competition, and struggle for survival. The prayer of Christ must be our prayer. Better still, we ought to seek to "practice what we pray". I don't think there will ever be "one church". But I suspect that heaven isn't divided up into denominations! So we could start by praying for each other, not just this week, but in the year to come.