

Sermon for Sunday, November 13, 2016

## UNITING IN FAITH

I had hoped, naively, that last Wednesday would be a good day, not because of who was elected—that's always a happy day for the winners and a sad day for the losers—but because the healing could begin. Red supporters and blue supporters could once again become red, white, and blue supporters. That didn't happen on Wednesday, or Thursday. The healing has not yet begun. Rather than re-uniting we remain, as a nation, deeply and bitterly divided. But more, unlike any other election in my memory, while the winning side was ebullient, the losing side was afraid. Someone suggested to me that might well have been the case even if the results were the opposite. I don't know. But regardless, our national unity is profoundly fractured.

Unity is not easily achieved because it has to be achieved outside of oneself. Unity implies a relationship with the other, be it two others, or two million others. It's rarely achieved in agreement, even in a relationship as intimate as marriage. It's achieved only in commitment, a commitment to the other, or in a commitment to the nation. Agreement is fleeting. Commitment endures, because it is based in love, love of the other, or love of the nation, or love of the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ.

In this service of worship, we remind ourselves that despite what is happening around us, we are committed to each other, and committed to the church, because we are committed to love, the unconditional love of the Lord, our God, which is our hope, our joy, our courage, and our salvation. We live, and speak, and act as those who trust in God, the Wholly Other One, which means that we are united. We are united in faith, and uniting in faith.

Our unity is also a living and dynamic thing, because we are the body of Christ, an organism that enjoys life that is abundant and eternal.

That we are united in God, and in God's love, is terribly important, because it's also possible to be united in fear, in loathing, and in despair. Hardly anything unites a nation more quickly than a common enemy, and our veterans, whom we gratefully acknowledge today, know this all too well and all too personally. But when the enemy is defeated, such unity often wanes. Enemies, thankfully, can be fleeting. Love, though, endures. So unity grounded and rooted in love endures as well, which is why Jesus told us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, because only in love, in unconditional love, does unity prevail.

On the eve of victory, our president-elect's first plea was that we come together now as a people. It was the right message. The next morning, our current President said we have to be Americans first, not Republicans or Democrats; also the right message. But it was the loser of this election who said we have to put our love of country first, and that was the most important message, because love and faith unite. Even in the church, or in this church, we have never united in agreement on goals, or on sermons or on the best hymns to sing (you're supposed to chuckle at that one). We have united in faith and love, and not because we all like each other, but because God first loved us. And our veterans didn't defend our freedom because of a fearsome enemy, but because they love our country. Love unites. Love empowers. And love endures. It is the stuff of eternity.

Our Stewardship Committee knew way back in May that this election campaign was going to be divisive, so we committed to proclaiming the message that at Ladue Chapel, despite our differences of opinion, we are united in faith, and also uniting in faith through our commitment of treasure, time, and talent to the proclamation of the good news of God's redeeming and reconciling love. The members whom we invited to express their faith and their commitment to Ladue Chapel in the videos we produced did so beyond our expectations. We are united in faith, and we are uniting the world in faith through our ministries.

Today is the second to the last Sunday in the Christian calendar. Once again we have spent a year retelling the narrative of salvation in Christ, and the amazing story of God's love affair with humankind. But now, as we

come to the end of the narrative, our lectionary readings remind us not only of God's glorious vision for the future, but also of the end that needs to take place before the new can emerge. Isaiah grants us a glimpse into the new heaven and the new earth that God has promised, but it's a new heaven and a new earth. What is old, will have to pass away. Jesus tells us that the end of the old heaven and old earth is going to be alarming, that those who embody and live into God's vision are going to face tough times, turmoil, persecution, even arrest and death, but need not fear these things. Through faith they can endure, and those who endure in faith will be saved.

Theologian John Howard Yoder calls this "a minority perspective." A majority perspective assumes that by power, wealth, organizing or hard work we can get things to turn out the way we want. A minority perspective harbors no such illusions. Instead, a minority church perspective seeks to embody and bear witness to the way of Jesus, without putting its trust in power, or wealth, or influence. It knows that the future is in God's hands, and that as followers of Christ we are in this for the long haul.<sup>1</sup> So though our temples collapse—think the Twin Towers—and we suffer from natural calamities—think earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes—we are not undone or dismayed. Because our hope is not in what humankind builds or accomplishes, but is in the everlasting faithfulness of God. Our hope is animated with Isaiah's vision of a world of justice and peace, and grounded in the tough reality of Jesus' call to endure.<sup>2</sup> And what do we do while we endure? We stand fast in faith, we trust God's promises, and we testify to the truth. We keep telling the story, the gospel story of God's forgiving, redeeming, and everlasting love, because that story, embodied in the church and its ministries, is a blessing to all the families of the earth. And we continue to understand that through faith, we have been blessed to be a blessing. We are stewards of God's gifts, of God's promises, of God's redeeming love, of God's hopes and dreams for the future, and of God's beloved son.

Each Sunday, after we have heard God's Word in scripture, anthem, and sermon, we have *The Offering*. It's a high moment in worship, when in response to the good news of God's great love for us we offer ourselves to the world just as God offered God's self to us in Jesus Christ.

The Offering is not just about taking up a collection of money for the church, although that is what it looks like. It's about offering ourselves in service to God and Christ's church. It's our way of saying thank you to God for all the goodness and the good gifts God gives us. It's also the way in which we commit ourselves to participating in God's cause to unite all the people of the world in faith. We aren't in the church just for ourselves. We are in the church for the sake of others, and especially for those who have yet to hear the good news of God's amazing love.

So the church's purpose in inviting you into a stewardship life is not to get your money, or your talents, or your time. It's to invite you into the unparalleled joy and satisfaction of an abundant life. To live into God's design for life, you need to give, as freely as you have received; you need to offer yourself as God has offered God's self; you need to love others as God has loved you. But love is not agreement. Love is commitment. Love unites us in faith. So let us love the Lord, our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Let us, in this and every time, be the church of Jesus Christ. It is the hope of the world.

**PRAYER:** Almighty and wondrous God, you have shown us the future you desire for us, and have invited us, your faithful children, to participate in its coming. Help us offer ourselves to the world as you have offered yourself to us in Jesus Christ. Help us individually and together testify to the joy, and meaning, and satisfaction of living your abundant life. Help us unite the world, and our country, in faith and love. We ask this in Christ's name, our all in all. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Mark P. Thomas  
Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church  
St. Louis, Missouri  
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Isaiah 65:17-25  
Luke 21:5-19

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle Childress, in *The Christian Century*, November 2, 2010, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.