

# Opening Worship

## Thursday, May 3, 2017

### One out of Many

**Scripture Readings:** *John 17:20-25, Colossians 3:12-17, Isaiah 11:6-9*

Grace upon each of you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

As an annual conference, we've been on a journey of faith under the theme of "Alive in Christ Together" during the last quadrennium. Thanks and praise be to God that God's people of the Susquehanna Conference are a powerful and living witness of a church alive in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ in many amazing, vibrant and transformative ways! Trusting God's presence is with us, I anticipate what great things God has in store for our common journey ahead with confidence, excitement, joy and hope.

We know that our beloved United Methodist Church is going through a time of much angst, divisiveness, and uncertainty. We can't deny the anxiety and fear over the differences our people have regarding human sexuality and its impact on our church and its future. We see a dark cloud of schism hanging on the horizon.

When the unity of our beloved church is at stake, I am compelled to make the oneness of the Body of Christ a top priority of our witness. The prayer of the Lord, "they may be one as we are one," deeply resonates with us and is penetrating our hearts and the corporate soul of our church for such a time as this.

In sync with the heart of Jesus, we will lift up "oneness in unity" as our ardent aspiration and prayer during this most critical time as a denomination.

The focus and spirit of this prayer of Jesus for oneness is summarized in two words: "Better Together."

"Better Together" says best what a connectional church such as ours is all about. It accentuates, affirms and celebrates the stronger mission and increased ministry we can accomplish together. "Better Together" also reflects the desire of God, the yearning of Jesus, and the aspiration of the Holy Spirit, for the Body of Christ to be one in unity.

With this quadrennial theme, "Better Together", each year we will lift up the prayer for oneness that we offer at the Lord's Table:

2017 – Make Us One

2018 – One with Christ

2019 – One with Each Other

2020 – One in Ministry to All the World

We are to rely on God for a breakthrough by the gift and power of prayer more than anything else.

Why prayer?

We pray because, no matter what we go through, we put our trust and hope in God who knows all, is able, and is in charge.

During the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness, at one point, they were in desperate need of water without the prospect of relief. God told Moses to strike a rock for water.

Water from a rock? Naturally you would seek water from a source other than a rock. But God wanted Moses to get water from a rock, the least likely source for water. That's the way God works at times, so that God's people will truly understand that God is in charge. When all is said and done, it is God who makes it happen, nobody else.

Under the current climate, oneness in unity may look like seeking water from a rock. However, knowing that God does make streams in a wasteland and does create a way out of no way, people of faith have hope against hope and trust the way of the Lord with confidence, perseverance and audacity.

So God's people, let's pray, pray, pray and pray. Amen!

(1) As we begin the new quadrennial journey with this ardent aspiration and prayer, first, I would like God's people of the Susquehanna Conference to be reminded of the initial motto of our country: E Pluribus Unum, meaning, out of many, one or one out of many.

These words appear on the Great Seal of our nation. No matter where we may have come from, we are "One out of Many": That's our foundational identity and irreversible destiny as a nation from our inception.

"Out of many, one" represents the unity we seek. Unity is not uniformity. Oneness is not the sameness. "Out of many, one" means unity in diversity, oneness over differences. That's the oneness in unity we are to pursue, represent, and demonstrate as God's people of the Body of Christ, as well as the people of this great nation.

The mission of the church was given in the spirit of E Pluribus Unum. The Great Commission says, "Go and make disciples of all nations...." Disciples of Jesus Christ are to be made out of as many nations as there are in the world. Jesus also said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John12:32)

The last words given to the disciples from the risen Christ were a call to be his witnesses to Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Jesus had E Pluribus Unum in mind when he claimed, not only Jerusalem, or all Judea, or Samaria, but the whole world.

Acts 15 shows us that the most critical moment in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ came when the first Church Council held in Jerusalem made a decision on the most difficult, controversial, and challenging question the early church ever faced: circumcision. Most biblical scholars agree that this decision made by the early church not to require circumcision on the Gentiles was the most historically significant one that made Christianity and its movement what it is today. The church was determined from its beginning to be a church of "E Pluribus Unum," "Out of Many, One."

E Pluribus Unum is the destiny of God's people: Revelation 5:9-10 tells that saints before the throne of the Lamb sing a song in these words: "You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood, you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." God's ultimate plan for God's people reflects the vision of E Pluribus Unum, out of many, one.

It's no wonder that there are so many references in the Bible that mandate unity in the Body of Christ in the spirit of E Pluribus Unum.

In spite of differences we have and diversity we represent, I plead with you my brothers and sisters of the Susquehanna Conference to embrace unity and affirm oneness in the spirit of E Pluribus Unum for such a time as this.

- (2) Secondly, I would like God's people of the Susquehanna Conference to lift up the vision of the beloved community, where the spirit of "E Pluribus Unum" is fully incarnate.

The vision is made of the images of a preferred future, that exudes hope, creates excitement, and motivates commitment. To God's people, it is a picture of the transformed world we want to see realized by making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Please hear what the Cabinet and I believe is the vision that the Susquehanna Conference is called to live out for such a time as this:

"Alive in Christ together, the Susquehanna Annual Conference will embody a beloved community of disciple-making congregations."

Among the images in this vision, I would like to ask you to give your attention to "the beloved community."

One of the most distinctive and dramatic images of the beloved community in the Bible is described in Isaiah 11:6-9. It is known as the prophecy of the peaceable kingdom that is to be established by the coming Messiah. It will be a world of harmony where there is no harm or destruction as the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth.

The contrast of creation in this biblical text is overwhelming – "wolf and lamb; leopard and the kid; calf and the lion and the fatling; cow and bear and their young; lion and ox; nursing child and asp; and the weaned child and the adder." The creatures represented here are least likely to be friends with one another. Rather they are natural enemies against one another or predator and prey. But there's no harm inflicted on any. They all coexist in peace as they eat together, play together, and simply get along with one another.

To me, the most intriguing part of this passage is the prominent presence of a child. Within those brief few verses, a child is lifted up three times. Verse 6 says it all to the point: "A little child will lead them."

What's the message?: As far as the beloved community of the kingdom of harmony and peace is concerned, get a clue from a child.

We recall that Jesus spoke about the need for us to become like a child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, the ultimate beloved community. According to Jesus, children are closer to the kingdom of God than anybody else.

Point?: As far as citizenship in the kingdom of God is concerned, the characteristics of a child are the most qualified.

What are those?

The first thing that comes to my mind is innocence.

Recently I read some funny but real stories that started with "When I was young, I believed...." Let me share with you a few of them:

.... if you swung too high on the swings, you would poke a hole in the sky with your foot.

....my uncle Fred went to the planet Mars for work every day. I pictured a spaceship and everything. Then I found out that there is a Mars, Pennsylvania.

...white cows gave white milk, and brown cows gave chocolate milk.

Out of innocence, children believe unbelievable things.

However, their innocence reflects the purity of the image of God in them. The image of God is alive in children in the most vivid way through their imagination: Children see the “magic in the world”. All things are possible in their minds. Their energy and their capacity to dream is limitless.

Through creativity: Children love to create and build. They are not limited by their preconceived thoughts. In their mind, they are willing to go to the place where nobody has gone before. They are curious. They explore their interests, pursue new ideas, and discover new things.

How about trust?: No one trusts like a child trusts her or his mom and dad.

Unconditional love: They will be more likely to love with no strings attached.

Humility: They don't presume that they know all or are the best. They continue to learn and grow all the time.

All of these characteristics that would qualify children for citizenship in the Beloved community are connected to one thing: Openness.

Children are willing to play with anyone else and instantly become friends. They don't make a big deal of the differences they may have among them. They are blind to the artificial divisions. They are not worried about the color of one's skin, where they are from or other social barriers. They open themselves to one another. That's the way they relate with one another.

As we saw in the video presentations, our children understand and practice what it means to have “open hearts, open minds, and open doors” better than anybody else.

It's not surprising that Jesus would choose a child as the embodiment of the kingdom of heaven.

A child shall lead.

Learn from children. Be more like them. Imagine like them. Dream dreams like them. Trust like them. Make friends with one another like them. Be humble like them. Be open like them. The beloved community will follow. A child shall lead.

(3) Thirdly, I would like God's people of the Susquehanna Conference to seek the perfect gift for oneness in unity: love.

For God's chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, unity is not something that can be taken for granted. The Colossians passage tells us that it would require all kinds of highly desirable and good virtues like compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, acceptance, tolerance, and particularly forgiveness. And then the ultimate virtue for unity is presented in these words: “Over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Love is the key.

As long as we believe in the all surpassing capacity and power of love, unity is within reach.

In his recent letter, my Episcopal colleague, Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar of the New England Conference, quoted these words authored by the Chaplain at Ohio Wesleyan College. He wrote, “If we have love in our hearts, disagreement will do us no harm. If we have NO LOVE in our hearts, agreements will do us no good.” Point?: The presence of love makes the difference. Love is the key.

Let's watch a video:

God's people, do you know your why? Do you have your why?

I do not minimize what and how. But discipleship is more about why than what and how. When your why is compelling, what and how will follow.

Spirituality is more about why.

Congregational vitality comes alive when our why is alive.

Do we have compelling reasons for being and doing the Church of Jesus Christ?

Why the church? Why ministry? Why mission?

If I were asked these questions, my final answer would be one word: love. Touched by the love of God, I am no longer the same. That's why. The love of God compels me. That's why. I am who I am by the love of God and I am what I am by the grace of God. That's why.

Why unity?

We are who we are because of the love of God in Jesus Christ. This love gives us enough reason for unity and it has enough power to bind us all together in perfect unity. We believe in love. This love means the world to us. That's why.

(4) Finally, I would like God's people of the Susquehanna Conference to see the larger picture. Our witness to be "Better Together" is about something much bigger than our conference and even than our denomination. It's about transforming the world.

As days go by, it seems more likely that the Korean Peninsula is at the brink of a major military conflict. The potential of loss of lives may reach unthinkable numbers. Some people say it could be millions. The indescribable tragedies of human suffering of the Korean War could be repeated, even in a larger and a more horrible scale.

Ardent prayers for the peaceful solution are solicited from all citizens of the world.

As you know, as soon as Korea was liberated from its 36 years of Japanese rule at the end of the Second World War, the country was divided by foreign powers. You know the rest of the story. Families and loved ones have been separated for more than 70 years. Husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers, separated in their teens and twenties are now in their eighties and nineties, if they are still alive, without a chance to see their loved ones. It is the only country still divided since the Cold War ended.

Do you know where the most thriving place of Christian faith in Korea once was? It was Pyongyang, the Capital city of North Korea. The church was so strong in the city that it was once called by some the Second Jerusalem in Asia. The divided Korea ended the Christian presence in the North.

Korea represents the pain and suffering of the tragedy of division and separation in the most heart-breaking way.

Political, ethnic, religious, and cultural conflicts are intensified in so many places around the world today. Fear of differences and all kinds of isms and phobias continue to raise walls of division, hostility, and disunity higher and higher in many nations.

Is there a way to overcome the differences we have and to affirm our oneness as a human family? Will the church show the way? Will the United Methodist Church represent healing to our broken world? Will people look at United Methodists and see a sign of hope?

God's people, we represent the presence of hope to the world, as well as to our church for such a time as this.

Please keep hope alive.

People may say that decisions have already been made in the minds of so many people and that making a case for “a way forward in unity” is irrelevant and pointless.

God’s people, it’s not over until it’s over!

This is God’s church before it’s our church. No one’s love for our church is greater than God’s love for her. Let’s be assured of God’s presence with us throughout the journey ahead. Indeed, God’s grace, mercy, and love for God’s people endures forever.

So I boldly ask you: Is this the time and are we the people to be one in Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world?

Yes, it is. Yes, we are.

If not now, when?

If not us, who?

Better Together! Make us one!

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, Healer of our brokenness, and Hope of the world.

Amen!