

## John 17:20-23

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,

**21** that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

**22** The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,

**23** I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

## Ephesians 2:13-20

**13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

**14** For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.

**15** He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,

**16** and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

**17** So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;

**18** for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

**19** So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God,

**20** built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

April 27, 1994 – the day for which we had waited all these many long years, the day for which the struggle against apartheid had been waged, for which so many of our people had been teargassed, bitten by police dogs, struck with quirts and batons, for which many more had been detained, tortured, and banned, for which others had been imprisoned, sentenced to death, for which others had gone into exile – the day had finally dawned when we would vote, when we could vote for the first time in a democratic election in the land of our birth. I had waited until I was sixty-two years old before I could vote. Nelson Mandela was seventy-six. That was what would happen today, April 27, 1994

The air was electric with excitement, anticipation, and anxiety, with fear even. Yes, the fear that those in the right wing who had promised to disrupt this day of days might in fact succeed in their nefarious schemes. After all, bombs had been going off right, left and center. There had been bomb explosions at the international airport in Johannesburg. Anything could happen.

This is the opening passage to the book “No Future Without Forgiveness” by Bishop Desmond Tutu, a black Anglican bishop who fought against apartheid in South Africa. He wrote that passage reflecting on the victory, long sought, and hard won, in which black South Africans were finally welcomed into South African society. Prior to 1994, South Africa was a country that had a history steeped with segregation and racial animus. In 1948, the white Afrikaner people took power in the South African government and instituted the apartheid regime that would be in place for decades. Jack Rogers, church historian, stated that after 1948 “devout Afrikaners could enforce what for many was their perceived mandate from God to order society on racial lines. Strict separation of the races followed. No interracial

sex or marriage was allowed. All public facilities such as buses, schools, hospitals, beaches were segregated. People of color had to carry passbooks containing information on the holder. No colored person could live, work or travel without a passbook. It gave police an excuse to detain any person of color at any time”

However, the African National Congress, co-chaired by Nelson Mandela did not stand by while that was happening. After a massacre in 1976, the apartheid government declared the ANC to be illegal and imprisoned Mandela for life. Even with Mandela in prison, the struggle continued, as the oppressive government committed further atrocities. While the political scene was filled with turmoil, so too was the life of the church in South Africa. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church, the non-white church in Africa, decided to take a moral and theological stand against apartheid as an unethical and anti-God stance. Written at the synod assembled by the DRMC in 1982, the Confession of Belhar stems from the conversations about the sinful nature of apartheid.

With a focus on unity, reconciliation and justice, the Confession of Belhar proved to be a powerful document in articulating a Christian perspective on racism and the sinful powers that work to separate people. It declares “That Christ’s work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with one another” and that “unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ... which must be earnestly pursued and sought”. It rejects any doctrine “which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the church. The strong language in this statement reflects the need for strength in that time. Good thing we don’t need to worry about need for reconciliation, unity and justice here, right?

Clearly we are in a time where unity is in short supply. Anger and animus, frustration and gridlock. We are in a time where the world seems to be moving

far past our ability to maintain any degree of unity. The Wall Street Journal has a very helpful tool to understand what it is that's going on in our political conversations these days. It's called "Red feed/Blue Feed". What it does is it presents a mock facebook feed for someone who subscribes to strongly liberal skewed websites, and another that presents a feed for strongly conservative skewed sites. I spent some time scrolling through these two feeds side by side, reading thoughts about healthcare, Donald Trump, ISIS and other topics. I believe these two items side by side reflect what we have going on in this country. On the one side – an article from Vox.com talking about Donald Trump destroying Americans' faith in their government. On the other side a post from Allen West decrying the "progressive socialist left" for the hypocrisy of decrying the president for divulging classified information while celebrating the release of Chelsea Manning, who was released after seven years in prison after disclosing a large number of government documents. It feels like we aren't even living on the same planet, let alone the same country. Yet still, we hear calls for unity. Unity. Unity. Come together and be united. But do the people saying this actually know what they're asking for? When I think of unity, my mind goes to a definition in which everyone is of one mind and one accord. That everyone agrees with each other and there is no discord or disagreement. Calls for unity that exist to stifle conversation. What kind of unity is this? Coercive unity that seems to say "if we aren't united, it's your fault for thinking and being different from me". It is hard to take someone seriously when they tell us to come together out of one side of their mouth and actively work to divide us out of the other side. But that is what we see in our time – misguided calls for a tissue paper unity. The kind of unity that Martin Luther King would call a "negative peace which is the absence of tension". This kind of unity is a convenient fiction that we can point to in order to make ourselves feel good, and helps us abdicate our responsibility to actually take the time to listen to our neighbor.

So what does unity mean? True unity can't be simply papering over disagreements to show that we all get along. African theologian Kuzuli Kosse says "unity may be defined as the condition in which something forms an organic whole". This organism is the unity that we win through thoughtful and careful engagement with each other. Paul tells us that Jesus "is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us". That is the first step to unity, a breaking down of dividing walls and hostility. They say that good fences make good neighbors. However, Jesus didn't care what kind of neighbor we had, only that we love this neighbor. That dividing wall, that which cleft us apart is broken down if we hear Jesus call to love our enemies, when we realize that Jesus definition of neighbor is way more expansive than any fence or wall can be.

Since we started the sermon in South Africa, let's return there to witness this in action. After the fall of the apartheid regime the country needed to find a way forward. Desmond Tutu outlines a couple of unsatisfactory ways in which the country could move forward. One solution would be trials similar to the Nuremburg trials, long and painful trials exposing vile and evil deeds. But Tutu pointed out that "while the allies could pack up and go home after Nuremburg, we in South Africa had to live with each other". The other solution would be to grant blanket amnesty to all offenders and move on as if apartheid had never happened. This form of national amnesia is only a breeding ground for future conflict and violence, not a solution at all. What they ended up deciding on was their "Truth and Reconciliation Commission", whose goals were to promote unity through forgiveness, understanding and a genuine coming together. This commission was set up, in Tutu's words to grant "amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure relating to the crime for which amnesty was being sought". Reconciliation not given through retribution, or by forgetting crimes

past, but by reckoning with them and working towards moving through them together. This all ties into the African understanding called *Ubuntu* that Tutu attempts to describe: “Ubuntu is very difficult to render into western language. It speaks of the very essence of human beings... it is to say “my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up in yours”. We belong in a bundle of life. We say “a person is a person through other persons”. It is not “I think therefore I am”. It says rather “I am human because I belong. I participate, I share””. This spirit of Ubuntu is the driving force behind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as the spirit that animates the Belhar Confession. Listen to the ways that the writers of Belhar recognize the interconnected Ubuntu of Christians: We reject any doctrine which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity and in despair of reconciliation. We believe that unity is manifested when we know “that we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another” and “that this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God”

Listen to the words of the constitution of South Africa: “The adoption of this constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of South Africa... these [problems] can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for Ubuntu but not for victimization.”

How rich would our country be if we enshrined the values of reconciliation into our fabric. Imagine a culture in which we work toward healing the wounds of the

past, and reconciling ourselves with each other instead of giving voice to the loudest and most outrageous dissent. What would it look like to seek unity through healing rifts and addressing hurt instead of using opinions as bludgeons. How can we make it so we no longer try to force unity, but rather approach unity intentionally, by seeing neighbor as one to be loved rather than denigrated. This doesn't mean blanket forgiveness for all injustices, but rather working together to address those systems which create injustice. This doesn't mean forgetting old, festering wounds, but working to balm those hurts through mutual dialogue and perseverance through trouble.

Most of all it takes talking about the issues that wound us. Common ground is not found when people can't interact. Coming together is impossible when your ears are closed to the problems of your neighbor. We are stronger when we are able to work together, compromising in those places where compromise is possible, standing strong in those places where it is not. Addressing that which has divided us for so long is the only way to work towards true unity. That is not unity of sloganeering or vain words, but unity of spirit, a genuine thirst for communion with our fellow human beings. As Tutu said "The debate was not on whether, but on how we might deal with this only too real past". Once we are liberated from the structures that exist to prop up racism, or liberated from the prison of our own thinking that denies the painful reality of our brothers and sisters we are then faced with the moral obligation to address those ways in which we have spent our days killing each other. The gift of that liberation comes with the obligation of reconciliation. Only then do we reach real and true unity.

Listen to the unity preached by Paul. When he talks about Jesus breaking down the dividing wall he then tells us what it is to live together: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members

of the household of God". May we always remember that our neighbor is not a stranger or alien, but a brother or a sister.