

PRAYER:

## **Black History Month: “God Does His Best work in the Midst of Unity”**

African-Americans played and continues to play a vital role in the development of the world-wide spiritual movement..

Hear the Good News, God does His best work in the midst of unity. In fact, so essential is the issue of oneness in the church that we are told to be on guard against those who try to destroy it. (Romans 16:17). God has intentionally reconciled racially divided groups into one new person, (Ephesians 2:14-15) uniting them into a new body, (Ephesians 2:16) in order that the church can function as one (Ephesians 2:13). When the church functions as one, we boldly brag on God to a world in desperate need of experiencing Him.

But how do we as a Church function as one? We don't. God does—both in us and through us. When we got saved, we were baptized into the body of Christ. No matter what our race, gender, or class is, when each of us came to faith in Jesus, we entered into a new family. We didn't create God's family. We became a part of it.

That is so important to realize because far too often we are trying to force unity when authentic unity cannot be mandated or manufactured. Instead, God says we are to “preserve the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3). The Holy Spirit has created our unity. It is our job to preserve it.

The reason why we haven't solved the racial divide in America after hundreds of years is because people apart from God are trying to invent unity, while people who belong to God are not living out the unity that we already possess. The result of both of these situations has been, and will continue to be, disastrous for our nation and the world. Let alone disastrous for the Church witness of Christ to the world.

So, what does this have to do with Black History Month? Everything.

Yes, we have made some significant strides away from enslavement, Jim Crow laws, and other overt displays of racial hatred. But tolerance is still a far cry from reconciliation. The mere fact that we remain relationally separated most of the time, only coming together for an occasional Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. event or maybe, just maybe, a cross-cultural/cross racial gathering shows how far we need to go. The proof of this is that we as Church, do not have a collective restoring effect of unity in our society. We have limited the degree to which God's presence will flow in us and through us because if what we call unity is not transforming individuals, churches and communities, then it is simply sociology (the organization, structure, and change of social groups and institutions) with a little Jesus sprinkled on top.

Unity can be defined in its most basic of terms as oneness of purpose. It means working together toward a common goal. Unity is not achieved through seminars, but rather through service—together. Unity is not uniformity either. Just like God is made up of three distinct Persons—each unique and diverse—unity does not negate individuality. Unity embraces diversity to create a stronger whole.

The early Christians were ordinary people like us. They were a rough-and-ready bunch thrown together by the will of God for a purpose they did not fully understand. John and James were crudely ambitious, Peter was highly impetuous, Judas was clearly a fanatical zealot, and the rest were so unremarkable that very little was said about them.

And however, you wish to describe them, “with one accord” could hardly be the words.

Yet soon after the resurrection of the Lord, this motley bunch was dramatically transformed. “May they be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I in you.” (John 17:21)

We read in both Acts 2 and 4 that the unity of mind and spirit was not evident in the Gospel. In fact, the word used to describe this unity, homothermous (literally “one mind”, as in the New English Bible) is only used in Acts (10 times) and in Romans (once).

In Acts, half of the usages describe the factual one-ness of the Christians in community and fellowship. The other half describes the one-ness of purpose of those who oppose the Gospel. In Romans, it was a prayer for such purposeful oneness of mind and spirit. That “with one accord” is not used at all in the rest of the New Testament may well be indicative that the early church after Acts was not, in fact, united in the way the community in Acts was.

Sadly, as it was then, so it is now.

In John 17:21, the Lord Jesus prays for the unity among those who will believe. He asks His Father to make believers one: “May they be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I in you...” (John 17:21)

It is a unity that reflects the divine unity of God the Son and God the Father, one that is not the result of human effort.

The center of unity Henri Nouwen observes: “Often we try to make unity among ourselves by focusing all our attention on each other and trying to find the place where we feel united. It is only when we are truly and deeply in love with God that we can truly be in love with each other. “But often we become disillusioned, realizing that no human being is capable of offering us what we most want. Such disillusionment can easily make us become bitter, cynical, demanding and even violent.”

So, what are we to do? The Lord who prays for unity Himself gives us the clue to this organic unity in John 15. He says to us simply: “Remain in me, and I will remain in you.” (John 15:4) He calls us to seek our unity in and through Him. We are not to direct our attention primarily to each other but to God to whom we belong. It is only when we are truly and deeply in love with God that we can truly be in love with each other. It is only when we are fully aware that we belong to God that we can look each other in the eye and know that we truly belong to each other. The deepest relationship between two human beings is the one mediated by God.

Jesus Christ is the source of our unity. Immediately after experiencing Pentecost, the community in Acts recognized that. Look to Jesus – we will find our ultimate unity there. We need our own inner Pentecost, that fresh spiritual encounter with the Lord where God renews our mind and revives our spirit. We need the Aha! moment where we humbly acknowledge Him as Lord of all.

It is only in that context that we can truly feel that we are “in one accord.” We must return to the source of our unity in the midst of conflict, division and discord. Together we need to “look to Jesus” to find our ultimate unity there – the unity of sinners one and all – no one is better, no one worse, than the other – all saved only by the grace of God. There, we humble ourselves, and only there can we realize our organic unity in Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Black History Month gives us an opportunity to intentionally familiarize ourselves in such a way that will enable us to embrace our diversity to its fullest, putting unity to use for good. When we do that—when we knowledgeably serve side by side—there will be no stopping what we can do in the name of Jesus Christ.