

Beyond Reason: Discovery in Worship and Mission

Christian Unity Sunday

Text: Isaiah 49:6b; John 1:9

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Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

(On this Christian Unity Sunday, the choirs of the two parishes, St. Mary's Catholic Church and Christ Community Church, in Spring Lake, have joined together in Antonio Vivaldi's "Gloria," during the 10:00 am worship hour. The choirs have been singing together, on occasion, since 1973, and there exists a special affection between the two parishes.)

(Scripture is read by Jim Penrice, a seminarian intern at St. Mary's, from Mundelein Seminary.)

On behalf of our pastor and all of your sisters and brothers at St. Mary's parish, I bring you warm greetings on this cold morning. Somewhere in the scripture it says, "It is good to be here." And it certainly is good to be with you today to worship together as sisters and brothers in Christ.

This is a reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Listen to me, O coast lands, and hearken, you peoples from afar. The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword. In the shadow of his hand, he hid me. He made me a polished arrow. In his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." But I said, "I have labored in vain. I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity, yet surely my right is with the Lord and my recompense with my God." And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has become my strength. He says it is too light a thing that you should be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Thus says the Lord, the redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers. Kings shall see and arise, princes, and they shall

prostrate themselves because of the Lord who is faithful, because of the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you.

I invite you to please stand for the proclamation of the Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.

This is a great experience for us; it is the Sunday designated by a large part of the Church as Christian Unity Sunday. It's a time in which we acknowledge that which is not true, but that which ought to be true. We acknowledge that we know better than we do, and, over the past 25 years of my second term here in this congregation, one of the great experiences for me has been the warm friendship between our neighboring parishes, St. Mary's and Christ Community. We have sung Christmas carols together; we have joined together in ecumenical services; the choirs have made presentations as this morning; we've had good fellowship together in our halls with hot chocolate and good things to eat - it's been enriching for me to experience the unity and the community between these two parishes, and I've heard the same thing from many of you. I've heard it also from the people of St. Mary's when we've had these occasions because, prior to that, we lived in the community together, perhaps we were neighbors, maybe we worked together, but on Sunday morning there was this kind of "Iron Curtain" that divided us and no one gave us permission to embrace one another as brothers and sisters in the faith. And so, it has been a beautiful experience for two neighboring parishes, one Roman Catholic, one Protestant, to recognize that the things that divide us are superficial and the things that make us one are fundamental, and this morning is another wonderful experience of that unity that we have in Jesus Christ.

God knows that unity is imperative for our world. The Roman Catholic theologian from whom I have learned so much, Hans Küng, has said that there will be no peace among the nations until there is peace among the religions, and there will be no peace among the religions until there is peace among the churches. That says it succinctly and pointedly, and it is true. Wherever you look in the globe today, wherever there is trouble, potential violence, living on the edge of war, you will find at the root of the conflict religious fervor, or someone using religion to fuel the fires of discord and alienation. It is imperative that as people of faith we learn to live together and in order to live together, it is imperative that we come to experience that oneness that is ours because we are all the children of the one

eternal God, who in the beginning brought all things into being and created humankind in God's image with a heart that continues to yearn, to embrace all God's children. I believe that's a biblical truth.

The passage from Isaiah is a very familiar passage; it's one of the servant songs in that section of Isaiah 40-55, a servant poem in which, to begin with, the servant seems to be Israel itself, and then moves to an individual who calls Israel to come to itself and to realize its purpose, because the song indicates that Israel was to be the place in which God was glorified on earth. God chose this people and in this people God would show God's glory. And so, the servant is to call Jacob back to God, to that prior claim to be that place where the light of God would dwell on earth.

God chose Israel, not to the exclusion of the nations, but in order to bring light to the nations, and in this poem after the servant hears the call to bring Jacob back to God, the voice says, "But, that's not enough. That's too light a task. I will make you a light to the nations in order that my salvation may be known to the end of the earth."

I believe that Israel at its best, at its moments of most profound understanding, saw itself to be the light of God to share with the nations in order that the world might experience God's saving grace.

We in the Christian Church believe that that light came to sharp focus in Jesus. In the prologue to his Gospel, John writes of the Word, the word that in the 14th verse becomes flesh. In the meantime, that word speaks of a God Who is the source of life and light for the world. The Gospel writer points to John the Baptist and says John was not the light, but John came to bear witness to the light, and that light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world. Christmas was the coming in human flesh of that one who would say, "I am the light of the world." Jesus was not, in himself, the source of light. Jesus was not the exclusive light given to humankind. Jesus was the human flesh, was that supreme moment when the light that flows from God, that enlightens everyone, was coming into sharp focus. Jesus became the locus of the light, the light of God that enlightens all. I believe that is biblically true.

But, if it's true, how can we realize it? How can we make it concrete in our world? What I want to say to you this morning is that, beyond reason, the truth is discovered in worship and mission. I say, beyond reason, because we will never come to the experience and the realization of unity through rational discussion.

It is strange for me to say that, eh? I'm the incurable theologian. I am always thinking, thinking, thinking. When I write with great persuasion, when I speak with the tongues of angels, I think the whole world will understand. I can't figure out why everybody doesn't see it! But, alas, I learned to my despair, that well-reasoned argument doesn't do it. It must be beyond reason; it must be experienced. When it is experienced, it need not be discussed, debated or argued.

When it is experienced, it is known; it becomes a reality, and it is my claim this morning that the experience comes not as I wish it would come, by some finely fashioned sermon, some theological discussion, some erudite essay - no. It will come when it comes in worship and in mission. It will come when "Gloria in excelsis Deo" is sung magnificently by human voice, accompanied by instrument. It will come when we as a people are lifted into the presence of the living God, when we are lifted out of ourselves and there is that transcendent moment when we know ourselves caught up in wonder, love and praise. It is in worship, those moments of adoration, those experiences when we lose our head, when we open our heart, when our whole being pulsates, when our goosebumps have goosebumps, and we know beyond any argument when we see two choirs gathered together from two parishes from two great traditions singing one voice to the glory of the one God - don't we know in that moment that we are together the children of God who delight in the worship of that combined chorus? It is in worship, whether in corporate worship like this or in other moments when in different gatherings we may suddenly experience ourselves together.

You know that Saturday nights are sacred. I seldom venture out of the house, but we did last evening for a special occasion - the birthday of the husband of the co-chair of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue Committee, Sylvia Kaufman, and it was one of those decade-turning birthdays, a very festive evening, a wonderful party. Because Sylvia and Dick Kaufman are Jewish, there were Jewish friends and relatives. But because they have been in that community so long, there were Gentiles, as well, and people of all stripes. And because Sylvia is Chair of the Jewish-Christian Committee, there were members of the committee. There happened to be four clergy persons there, and in spite of that, it wasn't a bad evening! Sylvia said, "How about our resident clergy blessing the meal before we partake?" And so, we did - a Presbyterian, a ... (what am I?), a Lutheran, and a Jewish rabbi, and for a moment that assembly there gathered knew a transcendence that deepened the evening and we knew that we were one before the true God Who gives us bread.

It is in worship that the superficial things that divide us are dissolved and we know ourselves truly to be one. And it is in mission, it is when we are not thinking the faith, but doing the faith. It is when our Parlour on Thanksgiving is filled with the aroma of roast turkey and there are people from various parishes around the community gathered together to roll up their sleeves and serve those who need a place on Thanksgiving, washing the dishes, making this a place of hospitality. It doesn't really matter what your brand is. Together there is a servant community of the people of Christ serving as an expression concretely of the compassion of God for all of those who would come. It comes in mission.

This is the birthday of Martin Luther King. It was 29 years ago that he was cut down by an assassin's bullet. He was a prophet in our midst. We liked him not a little, not a lot. He did not, of course, receive the honor in his life which is typical for prophets. But, he had a dream and in the rich cadences of that black preacher,

this nation was sensitized and we recognized the horror of the racism that was encased in law, and his dream caught on and black and white together began to make those moves to dismantle the structure of racism which is still far from where it ought to be, but which has been moved immeasurably by one man who had a dream of the day when people would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the character of their soul. The dream was caught by black and white and young and old, and the landscape has changed, and we came together because we were doing what was right and when we were doing what was right, then we knew that there was a deeper unity that bound us together, that we were all the children of God.

It is in worship and it is in mission that we come to experience the genuine unity of the human family. I got a call three or four weeks ago from a man named David or Daniel Fox. I had gotten a note to call this person. I didn't know who he was. There were some notes scribbled about what he wanted, but they didn't make any sense to me, and I've returned a few calls in the last few months that I wish I hadn't, and so I wasn't too eager to dial up this number, but I did. I found out that this was a gentleman who was a nephew of a chaplain in the Second World War who had been one of the four chaplains who had gone down with a troop ship. (Those of you who are older, like I am, will remember the story, perhaps.) He knew that I was a minister in the Reformed Church of America at the time and thought I might be able to give him some information about one of the chaplains, Clark Poling, who was a minister in the RCA. I pointed him to the archives of the RCA and we chatted a bit about the story, which I did remember, but he reminded me that it was early in the Second World War, the USS *Dorchester* was torpedoed in the North Atlantic by a Nazi torpedo and they had not enough life jackets on board.

There were four chaplains on board and those four chaplains took off their life preservers and handed them to the troops. And, as the troops were scrambling overside and into life boats, the chaplains stood on deck and they prayed for the troops, for their survival and their safety. The ship was mortally wounded and as it was slipping into that watery grave, the four chaplains stood on deck, linked arm in arm, praying for their people. One was a Methodist. One was a pastor in the Reformed Church. One was a Catholic priest, and one was a Jewish rabbi. What a picture. What an image. As they slipped under those icy waters and came into the presence of Light Eternal, do you suspect it mattered one whit that one was Jewish, one was Catholic and two were Protestant? Of course, it didn't. You know it didn't.

The reason I know that you know it didn't, is that about five years ago I had an epiphany experience in this congregation. I was on my way to Brandeis University to a think tank on congregational affiliation for Catholics, Protestants and Jews. Do you remember? It happened to be Reformation Sunday and I told you where I was going and for what reason and I suggested that perhaps I should go to Brandeis and say to that group that what we really need to do, we who are

from Geneva, is go to Rome and pick up our brothers and sisters there and go to Constantinople, picking up more brothers and sisters, moving to Mecca and then to Jerusalem where we might all experience the truth - that we are all together the children of God. And you know what you did? It had never happened before. For the first time in my ministry, you applauded the sermon and you said to me - "We've known it all along. When will you catch up with us?"

You, the people, knew it. When I articulated it, you affirmed it, because you knew it. You knew it here and my confidence for the future lies in the fact that you know it and increasingly the people of God of whatever stripe will be saying to ecclesiastical leaders, church bureaucrats and bishops and all kinds of such animals, you will be saying, "Get out of the way!" because we're coming together, because in your heart, you know it's true.