

A Modest Attempt at Cultivating Unity Among Christians

A Sermon delivered to the 223rd General Assembly
Pastor Don Meeks – Greenwich Presbyterian Church
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The Lord be with you...

1. Four years ago this week...nearly to the day...on June 19, 2014...

- I received a heart-felt email from one of my presbytery colleagues, Jeff Krehbiel
- Let me read a portion of that email to you:

Don:

I know that the news today from the General Assembly, which will be greeted by whoops of joy in my congregation, will likely receive a very different response from some of your members.

I had three people in my mind today as I was watching the proceedings...[here Jeff names two individuals within his close circle]...and you, my friend, who I know sincerely loves the church and also wishes to be faithful to the love and justice of Jesus Christ.

If there is any way that I can be of support to you or your congregation in interpreting the actions of the GA, I am happy to do whatever I can.

In peace, Jeff

- Jeff sent this email within hours of the historic actions at 221st GA in Detroit.
 - This was the day GA voted to affirm changes to our polity...
 - Making it possible for both ministers and Sessions...
 - To fully participate in same-gendered marriages.
- In my reply later that evening I congratulated Jeff for the hard-won struggle
 - That he and countless others had been engaged in for so long
- And I thanked him for his thoughtfulness in reaching out to me
 - For you see, Jeff and I had begun a journey together a year or so earlier
 - A journey of being in conversation together "across the aisle"

2. We had begun to facilitate at our Presbytery, what we were calling...

- "A modest attempt at an uncommonly gracious conversation among colleagues"
- Jeff reached out that day b/c he had begun to know me...
 - And he knew that the actions bringing great joy to him and his congregation
 - Would bring great challenge to me and mine.

- Because of our shared commitment to one another
 - Jeff expressed his affection and concern in this simple but meaningful way
- In my reply I also invited Jeff to consider coming to a future Session meeting
 - To offer his interpretation of the Scriptures that informed his thinking and pastoral approach on these issues.
- Over the next few weeks we arranged for Jeff to come to our August Session meeting
 - Where he shared with warmth, humility and passion...
 - Our leaders listened attentively and respectfully...
 - And engaged in, shall we say, some 'spirited' discussion!
- At the end of our evening together, we gathered around Jeff and prayed for him
 - And for his congregation and the presbytery.
- Now...I don't think anyone at Greenwich changed their mind that night...
 - But, friends, that evening was far from a total loss.
- For I believe something profound happened at Greenwich that August night
 - As the leaders of this 200 year-old...traditional, established...
 - Historically orthodox...Southern Presbyterian Church
 - Did our very best at putting Jesus' prayer for unity into practice

3. Why do I share this story?

- I mean, why risk upsetting the apple cart?
 - Why mention that vote that has been the source of so much division in our denomination...
 - That recalls the pain and exclusion of so many brothers and sisters
 - That stands behind so many churches now leaving the PCUSA?
 - Why not just play it safe up here...keep things light and happy?
- I tell this story for two reasons:
 - To honor our late brother, friend and colleague, Jeff Krehbiel...
 - Who sadly died last year after a short and courageous battle with cancer
 - To honor his good name and rich ministry...his pastoral heart and collegial spirit
- But I tell the story also to invite you...to enjoy what Jeff and I...
 - And many others in our presbytery had, and have, come to experience.
- The joy of committing ourselves...openly and intentionally...
 - To the deep work of bridging divides and seeking unity within the church

4. Friends, it's no secret that we are living in a time of great turmoil and tension

- The differences and divisions in our culture are working their way into our churches
 - We feel it in our pulpits and pews...in our Sunday school classrooms...
 - Around session tables...at presbytery meetings and beyond
- In light of all this, I believe there is one simple question we need to ask ourselves...
 - Are we going to be part of the problem, or part of the solution?
- As followers of Jesus Christ...as God's holy and dearly loved people
 - Are we willing to work "across the aisle"...across the divides...
 - Are we willing to enter into the tension?
- Are we willing to pick up our crosses...and offer ourselves...in some small way...
 - To be part of the answer to Jesus' prayer for his people to be one?

5. In the run-up to last year's election...

- One of the pastors I know from my college days...wrote a compelling challenge
 - An earnest, pastoral appeal for Christian unity in times of division...
- Listen to the words of Pastor Charlie Drew:
Yes, we must speak up for what is just and true. Yes, we must wrestle with each other over how best to love our neighbors as ourselves. But that is not enough. We must be, in how we conduct ourselves with each other, a living alternative to contempt. We must be sociologically inexplicable, and for that reason, a winsome invitation to our angry and cynical neighbors to take a serious look at the person we call Lord.
- Jesus' prays for our unity because he knows the world is watching...
 - He knows the world is always watching his people
- Are we offering a 'living alternative to contempt' these days?
 - Are we extending a 'winsome invitation' ...to angry and cynical neighbors?
- By our actions towards one another...towards other Christians...
 - Are we giving people a reason to take a serious look at Jesus?

6. I have become convinced that the cultural moment we are living in is providing us an unprecedented opportunity for witness and formation in Christ.

- How can we leverage this moment for a discipleship opportunity?
 - How can we give ourselves in new ways to living those harder parts of the Gospel?
 - Where we pick up our crosses...where we live toward unity with other Christians?

- As I have wrestled with these questions over the past few years...
 - I've come up with a simple five-point covenant...(revealing my Calvinist roots!)
 - As a way of organizing my thinking...and directing my energies and prayers
- I'm calling it..."My covenant for pursuing unity in times of disagreement"
 - (TSADs – I'm pretty sure this title wouldn't pass muster in Homiletics class!)
- But this is my modest attempt at pursuing unity in the body of Christ
 - At ground level...in the trenches...where I live...everyday.
 - It's my way of saying to God, "I want to be a part of the solution."

7. And so, friends, I offer for your consideration the following commitments...

- In light of John 17:20-23, *I will pray for and live towards unity with other Christians.*
 - As a daily prayer and posture, I am finding this transformative
 - It is giving me eyes to see across political, social, and theological divides
 - I need to recall Jesus' prayer at all times...but especially when we disagree.
- In light of Matthew 7:3-5, *I will acknowledge my own prejudices, excesses and failings before I attempt to criticize or correct other Christians.*
 - This is Jesus' essential pre-condition for all engaged in the work of love and justice
 - Openly calling out the failures of our own lives...our own theological camp...
 - Fundamentally alters the conversation...softens the room...softens the heart.
- In light of Romans 12:10 and 18, *I will trust that the intentions of those with whom I disagree are honorable, and speak the best of what I see in their efforts to serve Jesus Christ.*
 - Now this is where eyes tend to widen and eyebrows raise...
 - "You're kidding me, right? You want me to do what?"
 - Why is this so hard to imagine doing?
 - Because we default to doing the very opposite!
 - We tend to attribute the worst motives and intentions to others
 - We tend to demonize those who differ and disagree with us
 - And speak the worst of what we see in their lives
 - Friends, I would share with you, that when you actually begin to do this...
 - You may find two things happen:
 - Those with whom you disagree may actually begin to lean toward you
 - But you may also find others in your own "camp" leaning away from you.

- In light of Proverbs 18:13 and James 1:19, *I will seek to listen with understanding before speaking my own concerns*
 - I've heard it said that God gave us two ears and one mouth for a good reason...
 - So that we would listen twice as much as we speak.
 - Most of us live in silos, in small circles...of folks who tend to think like we do
 - When we risk going beyond our circle...get outside our little silos...
 - And listen to the experiences, hope and pain of others...
 - Friends, our world gets larger...
 - But more importantly, our hearts get softer

- In light of 1 Peter 3:15, *I will contend for my convictions with gentleness and respect out of reverence for Jesus Christ.*
 - In a word, this pulls us back to the heart of the matter...
 - To the honor and reverence of our Lord Jesus.
 - We are servants of Christ...not a cause or a 'camp'...not a position or a party
 - If we cannot thoughtfully listen to others...
 - And then gently and respectfully speak our hearts in a Christ-honoring way
 - Well then...I think we have some work to do.

8. Friends...this is an aspirational covenant

- Apart from a deep and abiding dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit
 - No effort we make in this way will succeed

- We know how profoundly fractured our communities are
 - How profoundly fractured our churches...and our own lives are

- These practices will not mend every division...or heal every wound
 - But they offer a way...a path...a modest attempt, as it were...
 - Of turning Jesus' prayer into a living reality...
 - In the places where we live...work...play...and where we worship

- All in the hope that the world may know the Father loves them...
 - And has sent His Son for them.

- So I invite you to join me...in front of a watching world...and our watching churches.
 - In letting Jesus lead us toward unity with other Christians in times of disagreement

- If not us...then, who?
 - If not now...then, when?
 - Amen...and amen.