

# The Unitive Vision



A sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 27, 2008 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 5-13; I Corinthians 1:10-18; and Matthew 4:12-23.

Today as most of you know is our annual meeting. Unlike some people, I generally like annual meetings. At least I like the gathering of the clan, and the opportunity to review and celebrate the events of the past year. I like to thank our lay leaders and to raise up new people to lead us into the days and months ahead.

In the secular world, January is that month of the year when the newsmedia has us visit some of the newsmakers of the past year. The animosities and hatreds that divide humanity would appear to be legion. On a daily basis, the media keeps us informed of the many evils that seek to separate us from each other and from God.

I was reminded of an old story. Shortly after the collapse of the French army at the outset of WWII, a group of French soldiers, all from the same village, surrendered. The Germans promised them that they would be returned to their homes.

Instead, they were herded into cattle cars. For three days they were given no food or water, and they were carried by train deep inside Germany to one of the notorious prisoner of war camps. Starving, frightened, and defeated, they were herded into a cold and dark barracks. Eventually, a German guard opened the door a crack. Behind him, in plain view, was a basket of freshly baked bread. Without a word, he grabbed a loaf from the basket, tossed it into their midst, and slammed the door.

After barely a moment in time, they began to scramble for the bread, a tangle of arms and legs as each tried to grab for the loaf. In an instant, they had become a frightened, mindless mob. Then through the mob came the voice of the chaplain, the village priest, speaking to them by name, "Henri, Jacques, Pierre..." until one by one they came to their senses. Gradually, they began to back off, until finally, the last desperate soldier who had fought to hold on to the loaf was left. He met the eyes of the chaplain, and then slowly he reached out and handed to the priest the loaf of bread. The priest took and blessed it, gave thanks and broke it, and then he went around the circle distributing bread to each.

As one old soldier now remembers it, there in that dark room, these depressed and desperate souls, through the words and actions of the sacrament, were once again restored to their unity with God and each other in Christ.

This is what St. Paul is talking about in today's epistle as he urges the church in Corinth to unity. This is the fellowship of love that we were taught by Jesus Christ when he gave us the new commandment, "...that you love one another as I have loved you." It is the vision of St. John the Divine when he tells us of "...a new Jerusalem coming down from heaven." It is what we find in St. Augustine's masterpiece *The City of God*. It is what motivated the ministry of St. Francis with the lepers, and St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, in his ministry of prayer. It is so common among the saints that the ascetical theologians call it the unitive vision. It is an image of life as God intends it, where the lion and lamb lie down together, where swords are turned into plowshares, and where each and every person is welcomed to the great banquet hall of the kingdom as an honored guest.

Archbishop William Temple once said, "The unity of the church is a perpetual fact. Our task is not to create it, but to exhibit it." To make it manifest is no easy task.

Near the end of his life, Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives, looking out over Jerusalem, and wept. The gospel writers record him saying, "Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks, but you were unwilling..."

The prophets called us a stiff-necked people and I see no indication that we've changed over the centuries. Not only is this true in national and international affairs, but it is true of the church as well, both within our denomination and between denominations. We differ over the meaning of scripture, the exercise of authority, the way in which the church is to be governed; we argue over matters of celibacy, the ordination of women, and the place of gay and lesbian Christians in the life of the church. In recent years, we have debated whether a Mormon who converts to Christianity must be rebaptized, and whether the Bishop of Utah more specifically, a former Mormon, was validly baptized in the first place. It puts me in mind of the little boy who declined an invitation to worship with a friend's family by saying, "I belong to a different abomination!"

The Corinthian church was no different all those years ago. They, too, had their share of disagreements. And St. Paul recognized and valued the different gifts and perspectives each brought to the church. However, he was very clear that all those differences, important as some of them may be, were transcended by one thing, and that one thing was the person of Jesus Christ. And that commonality, our baptism into his Body, was more important than all of the differences combined. It is the *inessentials* that divide us, but the *essentials* that unite us.

There is a wonderful story about essentials and inessentials retold by Anthony deMello in his book *The Song of the Bird*. He writes:

When the bishop's ship stopped at a remote island for a day, he determined to use the time as profitably as possible. He strolled along the seashore and came across three fishermen repairing their nets. In Pidgin English they explained to him that centuries before they had been Christianized by missionaries. "We, Christians!" they said, proudly pointing to one another.

The bishop was impressed. Did they know the Lord's Prayer? They had never heard of it. The bishop was shocked.

“What do you say, then, when you pray?”

“We lift eyes to heaven. We pray, “We are three, you are three, have mercy upon us.” The bishop was appalled at the primitive nature of their prayer. So he spent the whole day teaching the Lord's Prayer. The fishermen were poor learners, but they gave it all they had and before the bishop sailed away the next day he had the satisfaction of hearing them go through the whole formula without a fault.

Months later the bishop's ship happened to pass by those islands again and the bishop, as he paced the deck saying his evening prayers, recalled with pleasure the three men on that distant island who were now able to pray, thanks to his patient efforts. While he was lost in thought he happened to look up and noticed a spot of light in the east.

The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the water. The captain stopped the boat and everyone leaned over the rails to see the sight. When they were within speaking distance, the bishop recognized his three friends, the fishermen. “Bishop!” they exclaimed. “We hear your boat go past island and come hurry hurry to meet you.”

“What is it you want?” asked the awe-stricken bishop.

Bishop,” they said, “We so, so sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say, “Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come...” then we forget. Please tell us prayer again.” The bishop felt humbled. “Go back to your homes, my friends,” he said, “and each time you pray, say, “We are three, you are three, have mercy upon us.”

Those three friends had found what was essential – and so had the bishop.

In this season after Epiphany, we are called to carry the light of Christ into the dark corners of the world that all may shine with the glory of God. Like Peter and Andrew, James and John, we are called to proclaim the good news of God's reign.

There is a tale told by a former Archbishop of Canterbury. It may be apocryphal but it's a good tale nonetheless. It seems that when Jesus arrived in heaven following the Ascension, he was greeted warmly by the entire heavenly host who gathered to celebrate the completion of his mission. They asked him how things were going with God's plan for the salvation of the world, and more particularly, what arrangements he had left in place. And Jesus said, “Well, I left them in the hands of a tax collector and a couple of fishermen.” There was a lengthy silence. Members of the heavenly host exchanged glances their faces reflecting their bewilderment and consternation. Then, one of the more senior angels came forward and oh-so-carefully asked, “And, what is the back up plan.” And Jesus replied, “There is no back up plan.”

We, who are the members of his body, are called to carry out God's plan of salvation. Together. All of us. People of one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God, one mission, and one Body. Our task is not to create the unity of the church, but to make it manifest. To build on earth as it is in heaven a realm where the lion and lamb can lie down together, where swords are turned into plowshares, and where each and every person is welcomed as an honored guest.