

15 Pentecost 2020

God of Love;

We thank you for that love which will not stay its hold till it joins all nations and kindreds and tongues and people into one great family of love. Amen

-Theodore Parker (1810-1860), pastor, Boston's Unitarian Church.

According to their website, Christian Churches Together, or CCT, “provides a context – marked by prayer, worship and fellowship—in which churches can develop relationships with other churches with whom they presently have little contact.

CCT offers the possibility of face-to-face relationships with participants across denominational/Christian community lines or racial/ethnic divisions. As participants grow closer together in Christ, differences are better understood and commonalities affirmed. In praying and studying the scripture together, spiritual resources are deepened and prophetic voices are strengthened. There are new possibilities for shared witness, and new coalitions formed among churches on a variety of issues. “CCT, out of its commitment to grow closer together in Christ, offers a significant and credible voice in speaking to contemporary culture on issues of life, social justice and peace”.

This organization formed in 2007. Some of the many Christian organizations who belong to CCT include:

Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

Habitat for Humanity International

International Council of Community Churches

Mennonite Church USA

Moravian Church

National Baptist Convention, USA

National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

Orthodox Church in America

Reformed Church in America

Sojourners

The Episcopal Church USA

The Presbyterian Church USA

The Salvation Army

The United Methodist Church and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops

There are several more.

Other organizations like the National Council of Churches, the National Association of Evangelicals, along with CCT, work to developing cooperation between many faith-based organizations and denominations to work towards common goals such as Poverty, racism, social justice, climate control, and even the current pandemic. One can certainly broach the question of why there are so many denominations in the first place, but working for unity in purpose is a great start.

These larger faith-based organizations are able to pool resources if needed to accomplish the greater good. To spread the Love of God throughout this country and to the world. In

California, Clovis Hills Community church is a place where fire evacuees take time to get much-needed supplies and connect with each other.

"I mean every time I see somebody who lost their house and we just cry together. You know it is heartbreaking because I don't even know if my place is still standing," said Jeri Rutledge of Auberry.

While the Red Cross provides shelter and resources, local churches are stepping up to provide items immediately to the 45,000 evacuees.

Cross City has been collecting gift cards for victims and handing them out at Granite Ridge Intermediate School.

"Honestly people have been overwhelmed that we would step in and help out and would give them a gift card to a restaurant or something. I've had grandparents break down. I've had parents say now I can get some shoes for my kid and I see the kids in bare feet standing right in front of me," said Nick. Churches all over California, Oregon, and Washington are stepping up and working together to take care of local communities.

In our reading from Romans, Paul was speaking to a smaller community. The Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in Rome, were having disagreements. In today's text, those disagreements centered around food. Paul says; "The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. 4 Who are you to judge someone else's servant?"

Paul was not concerned with proving one group to be more correct than the other. The crux of his argument is that just as God has welcomed all kind of believers into the household of faithfulness, all those who serve within that household must learn to accept each other.

What we choose to eat or not to eat is irrelevant where God is concerned.

But Paul gets right to the heart of the matter. "You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister[a]? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat".

We know not to judge each other, but we make it so difficult to live it. We continually place obstacles in the way.

I agree with Paul in that we should welcome the diversity in our midst and then go with it.

The Episcopal Church has a history of not being diverse, in that for centuries, the church has been primarily all white. You still see that in many congregations today.

There was a time when we saw congregations formed along cultural lines. Even today, we see Black congregations, Latino congregations, and indigenous congregations. We see local congregations that exist within a few miles of each other.

We say that Everyone is welcome and I do think that we believe this to be true.

But how much are things changing?

I want to make one thing explicitly clear. I am not saying that any congregation should welcome people of different cultures, races, or ethnic backgrounds with the proviso, that

yes **you are welcome**, but this is how **we** do things here. You need to adapt to our ways. That is not what Paul is talking about at all.

Although churches do not divide over food issues, they can and have divided over doctrinal disagreements. Even here in south Michigan, folks left and new congregations formed, over disagreements. For a lot of seemingly valid reasons, stands were taken, feelings were hurt, and folks left the church altogether.

They were unable to stay in the conversation with each other and embrace their diversity. I am certainly not condemning staying with one's core beliefs, but I do agree that leaving if it occurs at all, should come after deep listening and learning.

Would Paul have felt that these reasons justified pulling apart the body of Christ? What about some of the really hot button topics that stop or start conversations today - abortion, LGBTQ rights, economic vitality vs. the environment, social justice issues, women's ordination, and defining marriage? Does Paul's advice call us to find a place for a multiplicity of "Christian" convictions on these issues? I think so.

The concept of closing multiple congregations and forming one larger diverse worshipping community, is something out of our reach for now. That will not happen on its own. On a larger scale, some denominations are trying to work together in more concrete ways. Take for example the Evangelical Lutherans and Episcopalians. The Methodists and Episcopalians. The Moravian church and Episcopalians.

All trying to work together even to the point of sharing clergy in some cases.

Almost 18 years ago, thirty-four church leaders met in Baltimore MD to discuss a cooperative effort.

In part, they agreed to the following:

"...that when our differences create unnecessary divisions, our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ is distorted. We offer our lamentations and longings with prayerful expectation that the Holy Spirit is moving us toward a new expression of our relationships with one another and our witness to the world."

"We lament that we are divided and that our divisions too often result in distrust, misunderstandings, fear and even hostility between us. We long for the broken body of Christ made whole, where unity can be celebrated in the midst of our diversity."

"We lament our often diffuse and diminished voice on matters critical to the gospel in our society. We long for a more common witness, vision and mission."

"We lament how our lack of faithfulness to each other has led to a lack of effectiveness on crucial issues of human dignity and social justice. We long to strengthen the prophetic public voice of the Christian community in America." End quote

To try and delve into all of the reasons that we have so many dominations in the world today would be way too extensive for any sermon. Even so, we see so many examples of church and synagogues working together for their communities.

The International Fellowship of Christians and Jews created a \$5 million emergency fund to help elderly and Holocaust survivors in Israel cope with the coronavirus. And as I said

before churches have come together during the pandemic and other disasters to put aside any differences apart for their deep love for Jesus.

In the past, I have expressed my belief that even in our own diocese, our congregations could do more together than we do. It is getting better. I think that the Physical distancing has helped in a way. The pandemic has **encouraged more** cooperation because of livestreaming worship services shared on the Internet.

We as a deanery in south Michigan have been much more active meeting on ZOOM twice a month this year. We have been able to see others on ZOOM throughout the Diocese and attend Bible studies and classes that many of us would not have been able to do in person. Once the pandemic is over, will St. Augustine's in Mason do more things with St Aiden's in Michigan Center? Will All Saints Brooklyn share more activities with our congregation here in Adrian. If I remember correctly, St. John's Clinton has held a joint service with St. Paul's in Jackson? St. Michael and all Angels in Cambridge Junction has already shared some activities with our congregation. Jan and I have gone several times to worship with St. Peter's in Hillsdale.

What about other church communities in Lenawee County?

Can we learn from each other?

David and I attended a common worship service this summer at Bethany Assembly of God. Several churches had been invited. At the Black Lives Matter Rally in Adrian a few months ago, 13 local religious leaders stood up and prayed before the gathering and then led the march along side Law Enforcement. I was one of those present. The Interfaith Alliance of Lenawee was meeting monthly prior to the pandemic. This group's Facebook page states:

““Our alliance consists of leaders from a variety of faiths who work together to facilitate programs that draw together diverse faiths and foster mutual respect, friendship, and cooperation”.

I see so much cooperation between many of the Faith traditions in Lenawee county working on social and justice issues. And yes, I still do see those who will not work together due to doctrinal divide and allowing core values to limit the sharing of the love of God with others. I hope this will change.

St. Paul still has a lot to say to all of us today.

We would do well to identify and remember the ‘weak’ ones in our congregations and our communities even if it turns out to be us.

Either way, this puts the burden on all members of a Christian community who perceive themselves and their beliefs as "strong", to consider with compassion the sensitivities of their brothers and sisters in faith. Hilary Clinton once said:

"Let's reach across the lines that divide us not with pointing fingers but outstretched hands."

She probably was not talking about the Church, but it still is true. God is a God of love; for everyone. We can do no less. Amen

"Far more crucial than what we know or do not know is what we do not want to know."

-Eric Hoffer