

SERMON: Loving Conflict: Connect and Unite
TEXT: Ephesians 4:1-7

10-25-20

About a dozen women from both Westminster and First Presbyterian began meeting last month to study *Into the Light: Finding Hope Through Prayers of Lament*, this year's Presbyterian Women/Horizons Bible Study. The serendipity of this topic as the focal point for this year should not be missed. As we near the end of 2020, we all understand lament better than ever before.

Just last week, as the study led us in a comparison of individual lament and communal lament, we learned that it is possible to be deeply divided in our individual political choices while coming together as a community to lament the state of our country. We found something we had in common: a deep sorrow over the growing anger, hatred, and violence for those with whom we disagree.

Furthermore, we discovered connection and unity in the prayers already in our hearts regarding the upcoming election. Prayers for God's guidance. Prayers that God's will be done. Prayers that all votes would be counted and the election be fair. Prayers that violence would be quelled and that peace would reign. Prayers for love to overcome hate.

This is the third and final segment in our series about LOVING CONFLICT, based on *Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement*. The third section of the document is titled, “Maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.” Our women’s Bible Study group illustrates well two of the actions on this list. Item number 7: “Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints as well as where we disagree.” And item number 10: “Include our disagreement in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God’s grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all.”

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he *begs* them - and us, of course - to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

We don’t have to *create* unity. We already have it, as we are all part of the body of Christ. And when we acknowledge that truth, then we need to act accordingly, to “lead a life worthy of the calling” as members of the body of Christ.

One commentary I consulted pointed out that the nature of the church is the body of Christ and the mission of the church is “to unite all races and nations in a single brotherhood of worship and love.”

This particular commentary is one I don't turn to very often, as it was published in 1953. But the Holy Spirit must have led me to pull it off the shelf, because I found it surprisingly fitting for us nearly 70 years later. Speaking of Ephesians as a whole, it says, “No book in the Bible is more pertinent to the life of our own times, when [humanity] faces the challenge now presented to it with compelling urgency: *Unite or perish*. It assures us that it is not the will of the God who made this universe that it should be perpetually divided against itself, but that it is [God's] gracious purpose to bring all things ‘in the fullness of time’ (1:10) into harmonious unity in Christ....The tragic divisions of [humanity] are healed only when [we] cease to be alienated from God and from the community that lives by faith in him....” (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, p.605)

The scripture also emphasizes that we are to “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The words “make every effort” indicate that the task will not be easy. This points to another item on the list from

Seeking to be Faithful Together. “Seek to stay in community with each other though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension.”

We have probably all experienced a meeting or a family gathering or other occasion when one person angrily storms out of the room in the middle of a heated argument. While it certainly can help to “take a breather” or step away from the argument temporarily, it only causes greater tension and division and misunderstanding when we’re unwilling to continue the conversation. If the work or the relationship is important, we have to “make every effort” to hang in there, to stay connected, to be ready to forgive and be forgiven, and “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

I’m reminded of the times I’ve been in a choir rehearsal. Learning a new piece of music, sometimes you come upon these “crunchy” sounds, like when you play two keys on the piano that are right next to each other. The sound has an edge to it that kind of makes you cringe. It’s unpleasant, and it’s hard to hear. The two notes don’t seem to *play* well together (pardon the pun). They seem to be in conflict. The technical term for this is dissonance.

What tends to happen, once I've learned the music and can hear it as a whole, I find that the dissonance can be positive, and powerful, and beautiful.

Unity does not mean uniformity. We are at our best as a church, as a family, as a country when we can be different and disagree, while still respecting, connecting, and getting along with one another.

I visited Israel in the Spring of 2014 on a peacemaking trip with nearly a hundred Presbyterians. I have a lot of wonderful memories of that trip. But the most beautiful was during Sunday morning worship at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. The sanctuary was packed with people that day. The small congregation of Palestinian Christians was, I'm sure, unaccustomed to welcoming 100 guests from halfway around the world. And it was hot. The worship was very similar to the traditional services that we know so well. And they were kind to repeat most everything in English, as well as Arabic, their own native language. But when it came time for us to say the Lord's Prayer, we all prayed together. In English, in Arabic, perhaps in Hebrew, as well. Many in our group were moved to tears. Despite the heat, it felt like heaven at that moment. It sounded like heaven. It looked like heaven. We didn't know one another; we were strangers. But we were one body of Christ as we prayed in unison the prayer he taught.

There is **one** body and **one** Spirit, just as you were called to the **one** hope of your calling, **one** Lord, **one** faith, **one** baptism, **one** God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

In a rainbow of colors and genders, languages and religions, ages and sizes, abilities and challenges, in a spirit of trust and love, may we CONNECT AND UNITE and maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. To the glory of God!

AMEN.