

# Devoted to Community

"They devoted themselves to apostolic teaching and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." --Acts 2:42

Week of prayer for Christian Unity 2011

Fran Salone-Pelletier

*Lead Chaplain at Brunswick Community Hospital,*

*Author of *Awakening to God: The Sunday Readings in Our Lives**

*(a trilogy of Scriptural meditations)*

Had I known what the readings, especially the Gospel, were for this event, I think I'd have been silent when the question arose: "Who is going to preach this year?" It is challenging enough to be presented with the need for Christian unity in the midst of the wondrous diversity we all maintain. But to add to that challenge a call and commission to stretch ourselves toward an ideal community is to raise the bar. To deepen it by reminding ourselves that we really have no other choice but to seek unity no matter how differently we express our Christianity goes beyond being a challenging mission. It is the lifestyle, the life breath of Christianity. We avoid it, deny it, or ignore it at our peril.

Those are hard and harsh words. I am reluctant to say them aloud. I don't even want to whisper them to myself. The words bring me face to face with a question that does more than simply prick my conscience. It confronts my consciousness of Christianity, of discipleship and evangelization. The question that I hear emerging from the Scriptures is, "Can I call myself a Christian, can we call ourselves Christians, and still remain unreconciled with each other? From that question other concerns are evoked. What do we need to do in order to attain unity? Must we be clones of each other? Can I maintain my present denominational affiliation while acknowledging the truth of another denomination?"

When we look at the three readings selected for this worship service, the answer becomes clear. It's not an easy road to follow. It is not a reality that will necessarily change overnight. After all, it has taken us years to develop our love for our own way of doing things, our own theologies, our own liturgies, our own rules and regulations. We have formed and re-formed the church since its earliest days. The apostles had differences of opinion. They had to expand their understanding of what it meant to follow the Way of Christ. Their trust in the letter of the law was shaken when they were faced with the problem of accepting uncircumcised Gentiles as members of the church.

Christians have argued and discussed what it means to follow Jesus from apostolic days to the present time. We looked for specific answers in Scripture—and are continuing to do so—yet we find directives that only specify, "Come, and see. Come, follow me." Jesus apparently wasn't and isn't interested in choosing one denomination over another. He just wants us to come

and see where he is. He wants us to follow him. There were no Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Non-denominational churches then. Jesus was a Jew.

So, what are we to do?

Isaiah (58:6ff) gives us both a direction in which to go and directives to follow. Here is our biblical GPS. How can we be one? The first thing is to fast from personal biases, prejudices and/or theologies that exclude understandings of God that differ from ours. Isaiah tells us to do the kind of fasting that God desires. We are to fast from holding others hostage. Release them from the unjust bonds we have used to tie them into knots. Set free all those we have oppressed with our self-righteousness, our narrow understanding of divinity, our judgments and severe criticism. Free them from the guilt and shame we have heaped upon them because they do not meet our standards of spiritual excellence.

Share our bread with the hungry, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked. Do not turn our backs on anyone.

I suspect that the Isaiah commands go deeper than physical freeing and feeding. I suspect we are being called to compassionate living. I suspect we are being challenged to recognize our own needs, our own hunger for God—the fullness of our being, our own thirst for a spiritual life, our own imprisonment.

When we begin to live as Isaiah commands, something wondrous happens—we change. That's right, we change! Our concentration is no longer on making others become like us. We begin to notice that we are being transformed individually and communally. We are transformed into the people of God. The divine light that we had kept hidden or obscured within the confines of our individual denominations breaks forth. The wounds of division within us and outside of us are healed. Light rises from our darkness. Gloom becomes like midday. We clearly hear God's promise, "Here, I am." Truly, God is in our midst.

God is in our midst when we stay together, holding all things in common. God is in our midst while we are sharing the bread of our existence, the meat of our belief systems. God is in our midst as we sell our property. God is in our midst as we dispose of our possessions—the ideas we thought were ours alone, the faith we narrowed into an exclusive ownership. God would have to be in our midst because we could never achieve this relinquishing of cherished goods on our own.

It has been said that everybody wants unity. All of us desire it from the bottom of our hearts. We are made for unity because we are made for happiness. We get knots in our stomachs when we are in family situations or other groups where one person is not speaking to another. We get a sinking feeling when we find ourselves in the middle of an unpleasant encounter where two people are at each others' throats in argumentation. We want it to go away. We want everything and everyone to get along.

Perhaps, we think the solution is to have unity centered in our viewpoint. My father used to proclaim on a rather frequent basis, "If you people would listen to me and do what I want,

everything would be fine." That translated into a submission that was more akin to enslavement than it was to freedom. We were not free to speak our minds, to offer our suggestions and ideas. We were free only to do what Daddy said.

God is not that kind of Daddy. God's parenting style is one of openness, of listening, of loving all of us unconditionally and promising to be with us no matter what we are or what we do. God's parenting style must be ours if we are to be God's people. We are to be people who are *forgiving*. That's our aim: to give and to receive. Our goal is not *forgetting*. Our mission is not to get others to come to our church, our denomination, our congregation.

Our unity will become a reality when we recognize the power packed in Matthew 5:20-24 proclaimed for us today. When all is said and done, to be one in the Spirit and one in the Lord, we must first reconcile with our brothers and sisters. We must first recognize our own imperfections, our own rigidity, our own inclination toward exclusivity and self-righteousness before we can offer the gift of ourselves to God and others.

The gospel passage indicates that we need to leave our gift, the present and presence we are, at the altar until we can peaceably coexist within the fabric and framework of our differences. We are being told that we cannot worship in our individual sanctuaries until and unless we have revered the sanctuary of humankind. We must leave the gift of our individual denominational stance at the altar until we are living in harmony with each other. That's a scary thought. It's also exciting. It fills us with enthusiasm in the deepest sense of that word.

Can you imagine what would or could happen in the greater Shallotte area if everyone from every church community, every church family, would leave their familiar sanctuaries to gather in the street in a movement of reconciliation? Can you see the crowds of people? I can see them. They are hugging each other with inspired love. They are whispering words of reverence and awe, phrases that offer apology and accept forgiveness. Probably the most common ones would be expressed in these words, "I didn't know."

I didn't know that your beliefs and mine are more alike than they are different. I didn't know that our becoming one doesn't mean that I have to be identical to you. I didn't realize that we are both striving to have God at the center of our lives. I didn't know that unity includes diversity. I am sorry that I concentrated on denominational differences instead of our commonality in faith.

Now we can go back to our sanctuaries, pick up the gifts we left behind and offer them with renewed faith, deepened hope, and intensified charity to God who gave them to us in the first place. Now we can worship separately in the style to which we have become accustomed, knowing that we are one in heart and mind. We have been released from all that held us in bondage, separated one from the other. We have paid the last penny, given to God the last vestige of our desires.

Our heart, our very being, has been broken open. We are free. We are one. We can now devote ourselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread, and to the prayers.