

76th General Convention
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Sermon for community worship
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A fan once asked Louis Armstrong, commonly known as Satchmo, “Pops, what is jazz?” His answer first came in that gentle smile and then this penetrating response, “Man, if you gotta ask, you’ll never know.”

The same can be said for unity. It would go like this. “Pops, what is unity?” “Man, if you gotta ask, you’ll never know.” In other words, you know it when you see it.

When you experience unity you know it because of how it makes you FEEL. The expression of unity, of interwoven community in Christ, is a powerful experience - difficult to describe in concept, but recognizable by the dynamic effects on our hearts when we touch it and we see it and we live it.

To me, unity is about the experience of being transformed in community. Unity is not about getting along, though that would be nice from time to time. It is not about the absence of conflict or the unattainable expectation that we can all believe exactly the same thing, except, of course, in our beloved Jesus Christ. Unity is not about “buying the world a Coke” or teaching the world to sing. And I don’t believe that unity is a state of being, some utopian community for us to construct and achieve. To me, unity is a spiritual practice – something we need to first understand and second, spend our lives trying to do. Unity is an action, an intention, something we practice over and over and over again in faithfulness to God. The Good News here is that the practice of unity has tremendous potential for transformation – unity, if it is unity, can change us, enlighten us, enlarge our perspectives and

our experiences, and bring us closer to God. Unity is about inviting others to be in community with us with the *hope and expectation* that as we do this, we will be changed by the people who we invite to join us.

And we are called to understand and practice unity in this way. In this morning's Gospel, Jesus responds to the lawyer's question about how to inherit eternal life with a simple response: love God and love God by loving your neighbor. What this tells us is that loving God is inherently relational – it is not contained to an individual transaction between individual and God, but requires an intentional connectivity to other people through which we allow ourselves to be changed.

Let me give you a couple of examples of what I mean.

A friend of mine wrote her master's thesis about the healing miracles in Luke's Gospel. Her thesis argument was that while Jesus was curing the ailments of the outcasts – the blind, the crippled, the scorned – he was also curing the community by restoring the outcast to them. Jesus was healing both the person *and* the community. Present in Luke's miracle stories is almost always three characters: the outcast, Jesus, and the crowd. And we so often overlook the crowd as a main character in these stories. But my friend's point was that the crowd is not there as innocent bystanders but actually the essential focus of the healing miracle. Jesus was ministering to the community by restoring the outcast to it. A community is only as good, only as capable, only as centered and wise as the people that populate it. When a community invites the outcast in, it is the community itself that benefits the most. For by bringing in the outcast or the outsider, the community gains for itself new perspective, a fresh witness of how God works in the world, new ideas, a new voice, new wisdom, and the possibility of passion and energy and sometimes even quirkiness. I can just imagine the blind man or the leper newly healed, newly restored to

the community watching Jesus and his disciples walk away down that dusty road and turning to the crowd and saying, “Let’s go inside and I will tell you all about my experience of the living God.” And together they walk back into town, expectant that the exchange of stories and experiences they will be changed, they will be united, in that exchange they will never be the same.

Here is one other story.

This past Palm Sunday I was invited to the Diocese of Fort Worth to visit and preach in a congregation. The congregation where I was preaching holds their weekly Sunday service in the community’s performing arts center. It’s a small town and the theater was, well, “rustic.” When I arrived, people were unloading card tables, buckets of water, palm branches and prayer books from the trunks of their cars in the parking lot and carrying them in. The people were waving and yelling greetings and dropping things and laughing. They waved at me and greeted me. Someone handed me something to carry. I was already starting to feel like I was in a screen play, something out of *It’s a Wonderful Life* but without the snow or Jimmy Stewart.

We processed into the theater and were all seated in small, red velvet theater seats that had seen better days. The stage is what got me. It was set up for a production of Hansel and Gretel. The card table, used for our altar, was set smack dab in front of the “boiling pot” meant to stew Hansel once he was fattened up. But right there in front of the pot, the card table was carefully draped in fair linen, the palm branches carefully placed in vessels brought from home. The table was prepared and the space had become sacred.

As the congregation sang I watched their faces. They were vibrant, alive, joyful, smiling, prayerful. They seemed so unafraid. And I was deeply, deeply moved. I realized at that time that I was standing in the middle of a Christian community let loose – a

community confident, expectant, generous - made up of an unlikely mishmash of people. This truly was community – unity - the kind of gathering described by Henri Nouwen when he said that true Christian community is a collection of people who under any other circumstances you would never have chosen for yourself. What moved me the most was the community's sense of openness. For they were able to communicate this to the outsider – through their words, through the choices they made about their worship, through their actions – that in no uncertain terms I was welcome there, but even more than that, they were hopeful that this new outsider might have something to share with them that could enflame their hearts, or refresh their minds. Simply, this community was open to being changed and deepened and strengthened by God's grace through the people that joined them anew each and every Sunday. It was one of the most distinct and profound experiences of Christian unity that I have ever had.

Today we celebrate our communion with the Moravian Church and in welcoming them into our midst I wonder if we might practice true Christian unity by ourselves wondering – how might they change us? Will we learn from them their art of communicating their theology through beautiful music and song? Will we learn from them that everything is sacred, that nothing is secular as everything is of God? Maybe one thing they have to teach us is how to sing our lives.

So today I invite you to consider taking on unity as a Christian practice. I invite you to look around more and notice people who live on the outside of our Episcopal communities and wonder how, if they were invited in, they might change us. I invite you to wonder how their experience of the living God, their hopes, their expectations, their thoughts, their wonderings might be brought into the center of our faith communities and allowed to redirect our hearts and minds toward God in new ways. In many ways we like the way we are. And we want to invite people in to what we've

already designed, planned and decided upon. But that is not unity. Unity is the receptivity to being changed. Our practice is to open our hearts to the unexpected. Our practice is to ease our rigidity about how we think things ought to look and create room for the Spirit to move through the people we invite in. If we can practice unity, we will deepen our relationship with God. And in the words of Mother Theresa, “If we have no peace it is because we have forgotten that we belong together.”

AMEN.