

**“Unity Without Uniformity”**  
**The Reverend Dr. Robert M. Zanicky**

**June 12, 2011**

**First Presbyterian Church  
Wilkes-Barre, PA  
Acts 2:1-21**

Chris was just celebrating his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and he had been playing golf all his life.

He comes home one day and said to his wife, "That's it, I will have to give up golf, my eyesight is that bad I can't see where the ball is going anymore."

His wife in trying to cheer him up replied, "I am sure you can give it one more go. Take my older brother with you."

"What good is that," replied Chris. "He's nearly 90."

"He may be nearly 90 but his eyesight is perfect," replied his wife.

Next day, off they went to play golf. Chris is a bit shaken up because of the previous day, but confident in his brother-in-law's eyesight. He tees up, breathes slowly and steps forward. And with an all mighty swing - drives the ball down the fairway.

He turns to his brother-in-law and asks, "Did you see the ball?"

"Of course Chris" replied his brother-in-law. "I have perfect eyesight".

Chris, all excited, turns back again and says "Where did it go?"

(Split second silence) "I don't remember".

Well, welcome to one part of the Church of Jesus Christ! Welcome Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, Arabians and those from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Asia and Egypt.

Perhaps more to the point; Welcome, Americans; those from various descendents – English, Scots, Welsh, Irish, Italians, Ukrainians, French, Spanish, Germans, from all parts of the world! And if there is a visiting Canadian- welcome! Welcome those from the far reaches of Shavertown, Dallas, Back Mountain, Mountain Top, Edwardsville, Kingston, Ashley, Pittston and other environs.

All this difference around us! I know the use of America as the world's "Melting Pot" has fallen on hard times, or better, has cooled, but I believe it still resonates some historic truth in defining America.

Out of many – one!

On multiple levels we humans are greatly concerned about finding, establishing community, and all that communicates for a healthful, secure, adhesive gathering – i.e. Community, Nation, Civilization, Religion.

Have you noticed that human beings are different? So similar in so many ways, but also due to genetics and environment, we can be and are different.

Today is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the Church. There is no doubt the Acts passage noted and read this morning is an idealized reconstruction of the Church's beginning – birth. But, what this story wishes to communicate is of prime importance in the development and growth of this (then) fledgling Jesus movement. Herein is a glimpse of our Christian roots. Of who we were, and who we are.

That for all the differences among us, we multiple and varied humans – Unity is needed to advance the cause. Basic agreement is necessary to hold us together. This was recognized. Of course we are not cookie cutter automatons all exactly alike – but some form of unity out of diversity is needed. We need to know our roots, our values – that have transcended history and remain constant, in the ever changing world.

This human quest transcends even our own particularized faith traditions; Presbyterians, Catholics, Mormons, Lutherans, Russian Orthodox, to name a few. We have seen how disunity throughout history has caused the slaughter and enslavement of billions of God's children. For those who have had the power and the ideology of enslavement toward those different from themselves, they have thrust their unity barbarically on others.

Hopefully we are at a stage historically, where power is wielded, and will be wielded with the assumption that "others" can continue to be "others" around a virtuous republic that is democratically envisioned. Our very faith has contributed to this way of using and limiting power, and recognizing our human differences with respect to an openness to learn from each other. Different languages no longer need divide us, nor do cultures need to compete. Babel and unity can form creative patterns of life. That is our hope. That is our necessity!

But the roots of this very position go deep into the Judeo-Christian tradition. Sometime back I attended an ecumenical gathering of Christian Leaders at St. Tekon's Seminary of the Orthodox tradition. Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Baptists, Assembly of God, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and others gathered to study together and dialogue about increasing the unity of the Christian Religion. Our topic for discussion was the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. The dean of the Seminary spoke eloquently to us on the way the Orthodox Christians approach the Eucharist. He added another designation to the list of names for this Sacramental supper – he called it from his tradition – the Divine Mystery.

He shared that the Orthodox really don't worry about how Christ is bodily present in the bread and wine. It is a mystery and they accept that. Now for those of us from the western tradition of Christianity, the Roman Catholics and Protestants – mystery is not enough. Reason and logic have been brought to bear on this issue of great magnitude (at least historically, for some of us). Rome through philosophical categories endeavors to argue the change in the elements. And we Protestants, in varying degrees, argue rationally (we believe) that the elements are changed but not as Rome defines; or they are not changed at all. Arguments have ensued rather boisterously over the centuries. (And I got the impression that our Orthodox Eastern friends have listened from a distance – over the centuries with a slight smile on their faces, over such wranglings by the Western separatists – Rome and Protestants. They have been thinking – "See, Rome, this is what happens when you break from the true Church, involved with all this rationality – Your people split into Protestants!")

At this time the Orthodox have closed communion. Only Orthodox may share their Eucharist. The reason – the lack of unity. I asked the dean of his hopes for open communion in the Orthodox Church. He was very hopeful, for this change sometime in the future. “The mystery element will figure large in this openness as I consider this issue,” he replied.

At lunch, the dean did share with me that he is a liberal in his church, and probably many other Orthodox theologians, especially in Eastern Europe would not be as optimistic. (What really caught my attention was Father’s confession that he was a liberal theologically. Where that would place me – I cannot imagine!) I was also heartened by the Roman Catholic priests’ position that the future will bring open communion within the Catholic Church. Not soon, but sometime!

All these flickers of “tongues of fire,” giving light individually – but hopefully – using these lights together – to increase the light of peace, justice and compassion to our world.

Searching our roots with our cultural/theological differences, yet seeking some form of unity.

Acts heralds the desire to find unity in Christ. As I have shared before, there has never been complete unity in the Christian religion. But, without question, we must seek some form of unity, which includes respecting each other, and working together on fundamental issues of justice and values.

And in the spirit of unity... Pope Benedict has been declaring with passion and resolve the importance of our Christian roots. He is immensely concerned that we, Christians, both in Europe and the United States are neglecting the deep roots of our faith. So much of who and what we are today – “sacred and secular” we owe to our Christian faith.

He is greatly concerned with what he calls the “dictatorship of relativism” – a belief “that does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires.” He goes on to say, “Being an adult means having a faith which does not follow the waves of today’s fashions or the latest novelties.”

He is on to something!!

This Zeitgeist – this mindset – of relativism must be approached through “reason”, not “emotion”, and denied, denied strongly!!

I love the imagery in this Pentecost story! I love the challenge!

Imagine - this then small group huddled in an upper room, confused, fearful, following the execution of their messiah, yet stirred by the resurrection. There they are – waiting. All of a sudden the rafters are shaking, the curtains are blowing about. Wind has filled the room! God’s Spirit has invaded them.

They are excited. They speak languages unknown to them. Those hearing this outside figure those Galileans are drunk! But this is not the case! This ragtag group is about to change the course of the world! The writer of Acts wants readers to know that what is taking place through Jesus Christ is open to all peoples, everywhere! Yes, there are differences galore! All these languages, and cultures, and yet a yearning for unity!

This ancient story is filled with teasing nuances for Religion and Society. I’ve only spoken one language this morning. There is so much more to unlock, uncover. My reoccurring concern is to

always hold high respect for difference, and yet I recognize the basic need for unity, which must include values – which are articulated in our scriptures and tradition. Also allowing for development and correction.

Our challenge today; within the Christian Religion; among all major Religions; among the civilizations throughout our world, is to diligently dialogue and discover a unity which uplifts the individual human in relation to his/her culture and the other cultures of the world – thus fulfilling a unity with holy and humane roots.

I am continuously reading about Islam, its history, theology, civilization; as well as dialoging with a Muslim whom I greatly respect. Whether we articulate our concern, our fear, the Western world is greatly concerned about Islam – as a Religion and a civilization.

We are struggling to get up to speed, with this second largest religion in our world.

What is essential to Islam? What type of relationship can the West hope to cultivate with Islam? Indeed, can we speak of Islam in the singular, or instead – Islams - in the plural? Just look at our Christianities – Catholic, Orthodox, Protestants – in various and numerous countries!

We must search our respective roots, and hopefully find a universal morality – ethos that we share, and thus work and live together.

A Unity – where human values of freedom, dignity, rule of law – reign and are shared! We must place a primacy on searching out this unity! And in turn unite against the evils that would destroy such unity, and endeavor to force a destructive uniformity on all peoples – whether in the name of the proletariat, or the name of God!

The Christian Church (or better, Christian Churches) must find their voices, their tongues – that will declare a burning message of hope, love and justice for our world.

We Christians must labor to build bridges to each other – Protestant – Catholic – Orthodox. And we must commit ourselves to understanding Islam, Islams – building bridges with those who will unite with our humane vision, and stand with us against those forces that would destroy and enslave God's children.

Pentecost witnesses to a unity within a great diversity of tongues, and cultures. Our vision is before us. Our work is before us.

Amen.