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“Christian Unity through Truth and Tolerance” GPPC 8-19-18
Colossians 3:12-17, John 8:32, 18:37-38a

This Sunday we conclude a three-week sermon series on Christian unity. The first Sunday we looked at unity built through fellowship (and worship was part of that). Last Sunday we examined our unity maintained through constructive conflict management in the church. And this Sunday we tackle Christian unity found in truth and tolerance.

Before his crucifixion for God’s truth-telling and truth-living, Jesus stood before Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. And Pilate, like too many political leaders through the centuries, imagined he was more powerful than he actually was. He said to Jesus, “So you’re a king, huh?” And Jesus said, “Actually, *you* say I’m a king. I was sent into the world to testify to the truth. Everybody who’s aligned with the truth listens to the truth that comes from me.” And Pilate asked, “What is truth?”

Maybe he was just being cynical, but let’s take the question seriously. “What *is* truth?” In the Bible and in Christian understanding, the truth means that which is real, genuine not imaginary or something

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simply wished for. While lies are like mist burned away by the morning sun, truth is as everlasting as God. While falsehood glitters as worthless as fool's gold, truth is priceless, rock solid. Dependable.

Jesus also said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Rather than lies that beckon with the false promise of liberation, truth actually *does* make us free. As Mark Twain said, "If you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." In other words, you don't have to remember which lie you're using to cover up the other lie. The truth will make you free.

In our day, the very idea of truth has taken a beating. Internationally respected news organizations are met with the blithe dismissal of being "fake news." Facts are replaced with "alternative facts" more accurately known as lies. Borrowing the treacherous language of dictators, the press is called "the enemy of the people."

But Christians, especially Presbyterians with our long history of approaching the faith nor merely with emotion but with all the resources of human intellect, are called to something better. Even though some people would have us believe that we live in a "post-truth" and "post-

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fact” world, in which truth and facts can be dispensed with if they are uncomfortable or personally critical, *we* believe in truth. Yes, we know that none of us completely comprehends the truth. So we should practice “humility” as the writer of Colossians commends. Still there actually *is* truth, not mere opinion, not just feeling, not simply wishful thinking but truth to be known.

And our calling as Christians is to pursue the truth. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, *and with all your mind,*” commanded Jesus. The pursuit of truth is not just for preachers; it is commanded of all Christians. So all of us are called to do our best to learn about and understand the Bible and the Christian faith. So we have Sunday school classes and various studies at other times throughout the year. Try some.

And all of us are called to learn about what’s actually going on in the world. As disciples of Christ, adults need to be paying attention to the news. And that requires being aware of media bias on the right and the left. We cannot simply watch Fox News on the right or MSNBC on the left; we need to be watching other stations more in the middle as

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well. I strongly suggest that we be reading the local newspaper for local news (and some national and international news) and be reading at least portions of a major city newspaper such as *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* online. Faithful discipleship requires us to look at multiple sources of information from various perspectives.

Preachers have a special obligation to seek the truth and to present it to the congregation as accurately as they can. In our Presbyterian tradition, when we're installed as pastors in a church we pastors promise, among other things, to proclaim "the good news in Word and Sacrament, teaching faith and caring for people... [showing] "the love and justice of Jesus Christ." Meanwhile, the congregation also makes promises by answering multiple questions regarding the pastor. One of them is "Will we listen to the word he (she) preaches, welcome his (her) pastoral care, and honor his (her) authority as he (she) seeks to honor and obey Jesus Christ our Lord?"

In our tradition we also believe the word of God comes to us in three ways, through Jesus Christ (the preeminent way), through Holy Scripture (the second best way), and finally in a lesser way, through

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preaching. Preaching itself is meant to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” It’s intended to encourage us but also to step on our toes and proclaim the Lordship of Christ in every area of life—personal, social, and political. That’s why for centuries Presbyterians have been leaders in working for human dignity, human rights, and the flourishing of humanity and creation. And it all involves seeking to know the truth and then applying that truth to the great social justice issues of our time. When he was in town the other day, the Rev. William Barber went so far as to say, “If you are a clergy, rabbi, or imam and not involved in social justice, you are involved in heresy.”

Of course we’re here to talk not only about the truth today, but also about unity. Does the truth actually unify us? Yes and no. Yes, it unifies us around God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and God’s revelation in scripture. But the truth also divides us, because it declares some things to be right and others to be wrong, some things to be helpful and others to be destructive. And discerning truth is sometimes difficult and requires careful, prayerful, discernment. But our culture tends to rush and push us toward “all or nothing” thinking, no middle ground. “You

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either totally agree with me or you're my enemy." This is known as a false dichotomy, and it is scourge upon our nation and our churches.

A native Texan, renowned sociologist and researcher Brené Brown grew up in a family that used guns for hunting. Even the children of the family were taught responsible gun ownership and gun safety from an early age. And they were not exposed to violence on TV until they were older. Initially, Brown was a member of the NRA, but over time she became disillusioned with the group's shift away from encouraging responsible gun ownership to demanding unfettered and destructive gun availability.

While speaking at an event, Brown mentioned that she and her husband were looking forward to teaching their son how to shoot skeet. One woman listener said, "I'm very surprised to hear that you're a gun lover. You don't strike me as the NRA type." Brown answered, "I'm not sure what you mean by 'gun lover' or 'the NRA type.'" The woman said, "If you're teaching your child how to shoot a gun, then I'm assuming that you support gun ownership and the NRA." Brown says

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she took a deep breath and answered, “You’re one for two on your assumptions. I do support responsible gun ownership. I do *not* in any way support the NRA just because I support responsible gun ownership.”

The woman continued, “But with all the school shootings—I don’t understand why you don’t support gun control.” Brown replied, “I absolutely do support commonsense gun laws. I believe in background checks and waiting periods. I don’t believe that it should be legal to sell automatic weapons, large magazines, or armor-piercing bullets. I don’t believe in campus carry. I...” At this point the woman interrupted, “You either support guns or you don’t.”

Brown says she then gave the most empathic answer she could marshal. “I know that this is a hard and heartbreaking issue, but I don’t think you’re hearing me. I’m not going to participate in a debate where this issue is reduced to *You either support guns or you don’t*. It’s too important. If you want to have a longer conversation about it, I’m happy

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to do that. And I wouldn't be surprised if the same issues [tick] us off and scare us." With that the woman stomped away.

But Brown says she feels that this was actually a successful exchange. Why? Because Brown did not avoid the conversation. Nor did she simply cave in and abandon her beliefs. Nor did she just yell or insult the woman. Instead, she explained her position as clearly as she could and she was respectful. Though the woman refused to engage in dialogue and instead stormed away, that was her choice. And Brown honored it. (Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*, 100-102.)

Brown provides an example for us of refusing the false dichotomy so popular these days. And the church can model this response of complexity and civility for the larger world. Complicated questions often require complicated answers. We do not have to allow ourselves to be forced into simplistic "you're either with me or against me" answers. Nuance is our friend.

And we do not have to call each other names or hate each other either. Instead, we can model clarity about what we believe and respect

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in our dialogue. We're called to seek truth and faithfulness. We're also called to love God, to love each other, and to love the world, because God loves us and all the world.

At age 29 (almost 30), I began my ministry in 1990 as the pastor of a 150-member church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The congregation was a wonderful mix of liberals, moderates, and conservatives, and I really enjoyed being on the spiritual journey with them and talking about how our faith spoke not only to our personal lives but to the great issues of the day. But, of course, it wasn't easy, because (Surprise! Surprise!) we did not agree about everything.

In 1991, when I'd been at the church just a little less than a year, our denomination released a faith and human sexuality document that leaned toward the progressive side of things, especially when it came to the rights of LGBT folks. As you can imagine (or can remember) this was controversial and revolutionary back then.

The local TV station called me at home and asked if I would do a television interview about the report. I had not yet read the full report

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(which I admitted). So I was a little bit reluctant to be interviewed about it. Also, I knew that many of our church members did not agree with the report's (and my) stances on these issues, but the issues were important to me. So with my heart in my throat I put on a coat and tie and drove down to the church for the interview. The station sent out a cameraman and young woman reporter who took video of the outside and inside of the church and interviewed me on camera for about 30 minutes. I spoke at length about biblical interpretation, scientific findings on human sexuality, issues of God's justice and mercy.

It was the lead story for the 11:00 news that night. They even had a little teaser during the evening commercials prior to 11:00 with one of the news anchors raising an eyebrow and warning viewers about a church denominational report with "some pretty liberal views."

They ran about 30 seconds of the entire 30 minute interview. I did not sleep well that night.

The next day phone calls from church members came. "Hey, the church looked great on TV. You looked pretty good too." People were

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just thrilled that our church was on TV. Nobody was mad. Nobody was asking for my head on a platter. It appeared my pastoral career might actually last longer than a year.

But then one of the church's elders, a kind-hearted, but tough, retired Lancaster City police detective, Chet, caught me at a meeting and questioned me about my comments. He didn't like what he'd heard. He didn't agree with my explanation for why I believed as I did. He brought up his disagreement at more than one committee meeting. And then Chet quit coming to worship.

Now the church was located in a neighborhood plagued by poverty, drugs, and violence. So church members often took turns watching the cars in the parking lot on Sunday mornings. And Chet would watch the cars, but he would not come in for worship. This went on for about three weeks.

Finally, one Sunday I went out to the parking lot, saw Chet, and spoke to him. "Chet, this is silly. Come on in. You need to come on back to worship. We can disagree." And that was enough.

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You see as mad as he was, Chet also loved the church. So when I spoke to him face to face, refused to give up on him, he let go of his anger and came back to church. Chet's relationship to the church was more important to him than his disagreement with me about an important issue. A couple of years later Chet died suddenly and I officiated at his funeral. We were all heartbroken, but also deeply grateful that he was willing to disagree, yet be tolerant and remain in community.

The writer of Colossians says it well. "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Yes, it does. Yes, it does. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal