

That 'U' Word

Ephesians 4:1-7. 11-14

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you 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. 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.

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. [...] The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

For better or worse I've got Charlottesville on my mind. Honestly, the events which shaped last Summer are not events that I want to dwell on. I'd be quite content with forgetting that Charlottesville ever happened. But to forget Charlottesville is to forget Heather Heyer and DeAndre Harris. To forget Charlottesville is to repeat our mistakes; it is to miss the lessons that were purchased with blood that still cries out from the streets of Charlottesville, Ferguson, Sanford, Baton Rouge, and Staten Island. It is to forget that cost of the

tears that water the grounds of so-called Justice Centers, used to scatter immigrant families across this land. We cannot forget Charlottesville, we cannot speed past this, the one-year anniversary of that weekend, because this is America, this is our America.

We must own Charlottesville because Charlottesville didn't just happen, it wasn't birthed in just one night, it wasn't the revelatory brain child of Richard Spencer or even David Duke. No my friends, we know better than to relegate the "Blood and Soil" rhetoric of the *Unite the Right* rally to just a weekend in Virginia. Charlottesville has a long history, a history that challenges us to confront the particularly Christian legacy of this brand of American exceptionalism. We here today, who love our God and love our Faith, we have to grapple with the implications, consequences, and the legacy of this Faith, for what was on display in Charlottesville is our Christianity.

Not the believers standing with the protestors that put their bodies on the line, no, we must admit that those who carried torches, those who chanted "Jews will not replace us," those who swore allegiance to a treasonous band of criminals that threatened the Union, they are our responsibility. For whenever we attempt to

gloss over the complicated history of Protestant faith in America, we concede space to those who would use Christ to condone their hatred.

Theirs is a faith that is not drawn from the life and ministry of Christ, it is not drawn from what brings us together and makes us one, no, their faith is drawn from hate and difference, from false notions of supremacy used to convince them that they are gods in their own right. It is a particularly American faith that as the Presbyterian Church: *U.S.A.* we must reckon with.

I've had to reckon with it, for the Sanctuary in which I first heard the still small voice of God calling me to walk the journey with Christ, is the same Sanctuary where in 1931 members of the local Klu Klux Klan participated in the dedication ceremony the church building, it is the same Sanctuary where they presented the congregation with American and Christian flags for display during worship. This is the legacy of the Church in which I grew up, and it is the legacy of our Faith in America, rich in power but poor in spirit.

And out of this Paul's words to the Church at Ephesus come to mind, out of this legacy, in the shadow of Charlottesville and the threat of the Klan we hear the call to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which [we] have been called," the call to that "U" word, the call to Unity.

Since I am duty bound to tell the truth in the pulpit, I must admit I don't really care for the "U" word, for calls of United for me, as a black man in America often sound like the call to death, and not death tied to resurrection. But rather death in the American sense which means invisibility. Unity has lost the tanginess of it flavor for Unity has taken on the meaning of sameness.

Calls for Unity are often no more than trite calls to compliance, they are an invitation to erasure, they are a call to death without the resurrection and thus this call is anything but Christ-like. And so, I do not care for the "U" word because it is a betrayal of what Paul calls us to in this morning's text. For Paul's Unity is not a word suspended in the air, unattached, ungrounded, and intangible. What Paul calls us to is not Unity but Unity of the Spirit. And the Spirit makes all the difference. For Unity of the Spirit is tangible, it is deeply rooted in community, and finds its way into the cracks and crevices of our Faith, pulling us into the discomfort that comes with following Christ.

And so as we observe the anniversary of Charlottesville we must be wary of calls to Unity that forget the Spirit, for Unity without the Spirit leaves us patting our backs for getting everyone in the room while ignoring the disparities with who is present at the table. Unity without the Spirit results in presence not power,

quorum and not community. Unity of the Spirit is Unity that sustains us for the work ahead that will require us to get proximate, to be prayerful, and to speak prophetically.

We cannot assume that Ephesus had a Unity problem, and honestly, we don't need to in order for Paul's words to make sense for us today as a reminder of our calling to the God who chose us and the person next to us, and the person on Facebook who just doesn't get it. "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 [Creator] of all, who is above all and through all and in all. It is for this reason that with all humility gentleness, and patience, we bear with one another in love, knowing that we are different, as God is the God to many and to one, to all of Israel and to Moses, to the disciples and to the Syrophenician Woman, to you and to me, and we encounter this God just as we are, with the uniqueness of our call and the purpose of our lives. The call to Unity of the Spirit is the call to build courageous community, and that is only done when we get proximate.

The Civil Rights lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson is fond of reminding his audience in his public speeches to get proximate, that we "cannot be an effective problem-solver[s] from a distance. There are details and nuances to

problems that you will miss unless you are close enough to observe those details.”

And so too, if we are going to be as Christ is, building community where there seems to be no commonality we will have to be vulnerable enough to get proximate, to be with one another, in the tension of our differences. It is the tension that is the raw stuff of community, not what makes us the same, for the gifts of God are not the same, some of us are called to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and teachers. Some of us are called to be agitators, some of us are called to be reflective, some of us are called to protest, and some of us are called to bail the protestors out, none of us are called to be the same. For one, because sameness is boring. And also because our God who is One is made up of Three, each unique in the way they show up in this world. And so the call is to get proximate where we would rather not be, in the hope of being more Christ-like and prayerfully bringing about God’s kin-dom on Earth.

That word prayerfully is a tricky one, it is a word that has guided the work of the Vision 2020 Team, as we have discerned together where God is calling our denomination. Prayerfulness calls us to be together, that we do not work alone but we partner with God and one another.

Being Prayerful puts our call into context, the call to lead a life worthy of our calling is something that is only possible through Christ. And yet, the realization of our call will only be brought about when we commit to being God's hands and feet in this world, hands that join together with other hands to touch what has been made untouchable, feet that walk together to the places we'd rather neglect.

Prayerfulness is the ability to be vulnerable enough to depend on God completely, and faithful enough to work until God answers, no matter how long it may take.

We are charged to be Prayerful in a world that does not want to know of our sustaining and redeeming God. We are called to be Prayerful in a world that looks for power in all the wrong places. We are commissioned to be Prayerful in a Faith that is so fragmented it cannot hear the voice of God calling its members to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God. We must be Prayerful, for without a dependence on God and a determination to do God's work we disrespect that community that Christ prefigured in his life and witness. We must make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit, the unity that is already available but is never taken advantage of. Have you truly made the effort to respond to God's call

upon your life? Have you given up the false belief that there are parts of your life that do not belong to God?

Again since I am in this pulpit I must be honest, I have to admit that I haven't made every effort. I am not always prayerful, because being prayerful is not comfortable, it reminds me that I am not strong enough alone, and that I cannot be a Christian alone. I am not always prayerful but that is what community brings to the table, it pushes us where we are least comfortable, it gives us access to some folks who are strong where we are weak, who can see our blind spots and who love us when we do not love ourselves. Being prayerful opens our eyes to the reality that we can't just have a conversation with God, but we've got to engage in conversations with God and all of God's children if we are to be made one with Christ and thus joined to the One who created, sustains, and redeems us with each new morning.

The problem is that sometimes the night lasts too long, and the vision of God's kin-dom can easily be lost in the darkness. In fact it can be lost in a committee meeting. Believe me I know. 8 months ago, the 2020 Vision Team was gathered at a hotel in Dallas, Texas, we were 9 hours into a marathon meeting of perfecting a draft vision of the Guiding Statement that we would submit to the

denomination for study. As we closed in on the 10th hour, the tension in the room was palpable as we argued over the right conjunction to use and the placement of comas. We hadn't gotten to the fun part of committee work, where wine bottles are opened and laptops are closed, no, we were in a windowless conference room, sitting in a circle, going back and forth about whether or not a comma after "but" changed how the denomination would receive what we think God is saying to the PCUSA today. And in all of that bickering, and tensions, and windowless hotel room smell, we forgot that we were not called to get the comas right, we were called to be prophetic. We were called to cast the vision, to make it plain, until!

"Until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." Until Christ returns with the sound of the trumpet, until the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, until sight has been recovered, until the captives have been released, until the Lord's favor has been proclaimed, we are called to cast the vision, to prophesy even when we are sure what we have to say is absolutely crazy, we are called to prophesy and to sustain the vision us until all have come to the unity of faith. We cannot let the vision lapse, because the last time we did Klan

members presented flags to my childhood church. We cannot let the vision lapse, because the last time we did Christianity in this country was co-opted by those who masqueraded respectability as holiness, patriarchy as sacred, and racism as the command of God. We cannot let the vision lapse, because without a vision the people perish, and our God who fed 5,000, our God who healed the woman with the issue of blood, our God who called Lazarus out of the grave, our God who walked out of the tomb, this God calls us from life to life, life sustained with a vision of God's future.

And so we must be prophetic, never allowing the vision to get lost in the darkness, we must be prayerful, relying on God's grace and working for God's justice, and we must get proximate, building relationships from the diversity of God's creativity that the "U" word will never lose its flavor again, and that we may be made one through the unity of the Spirit with our God the Creator of all, who is above all and through all, and in all. Amen.