



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Divided Humanity, United Divinity

### Sermon for Epiphany 3, January 22, 2017

*Readings:* Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23; Psalm 27:1, 5-13

*Sermon text:* Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 1 Corinthians 1:10

Please stop your fighting over who controls the church, the Apostle Paul wrote to the first generation of Christians in the Greek city of Corinth. Don't divide over who has the right understanding of Christ and the most Holy Spirit.

Paul said that he heard about the disputes from Chloe's people. They told him that some church members claim they belong to the party of Apollos, others Paul, yet a third that to Cephas (Peter). Yet another group says no, we belong to Christ (so there!). Paul wrote, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."

Good luck with that, St Paul. There will be divisions among people as long as people are human. It is no use to appeal for unity. It won't happen. As long as people are human they will be divided.

Families will be divided; communities divided; nations divided. Even individuals will be divided, and indeed are divided now, within themselves.

Why is this? Because each person stands in a unique place and time, and all the laws of physics and the power of human ingenuity cannot alter that inescapable result of the differentiation of space and the arrow of time. Even an individual living with an integrated self among a familiar community within a well-defined landscape yet grows and changes over the course of a lifetime. She will never step into the same river twice. And few indeed are those individuals who have integrated selves within stable environments. The world we live in is characterized by an increasing pace of change and flux of people. We live in a whitewater rapids of history.

And because we stand—or swim—in different places and see with our own eyes, and not those of another, so we will always have different perspectives and experiences, leading to different understanding and different approaches about what just happened, is happening now and what to do next. Difference leads to disagreement leads to division leads to quarrel leads to war. Unity is gained through superior power, not shared understanding, except perhaps when one group agrees that another group is an enemy and become unified by fear and hatred. Which leads to war.

What then will bring peace to the nations, unity to the people, calm in the storm of self?

I am coming around to the idea that humanist ideals of personal freedom and equality under the law are not enough to unify a people. We see the strains of our Enlightenment humanist ideals in this past decade and recent election leading to a “Fractured Republic” (Yural Levin’s book of that title), a “Divided States of America” (PBS special of that title).

President Trump in his Inaugural Address proposed that patriotic love of country can unify us. But he also made clear that politicians in Washington and educated elites do not share the same love of country but have gained from globalization at the expense of their fellow Americans; hardly a unifying move. Former President Obama in his Farewell Address raised up the ideal of citizenship—not trying to reach for unity of ideas but upholding the peaceful and democratic contest for power among an engaged electorate. But during his term he failed to unify the country despite his soaring rhetoric of shared American values and common humanity. It seems that humanist ideals alone will not lead to a more perfect union. No matter how many times we invoke Dr. King and the dream of a racially just beloved community, we remain tempted by if not tied to ethnic tribalism and class struggle. I guess it is just the way of the world, the reality of human nature.

What then? Give up? Of course not, we are people of faith. In God we trust. Jesus is our Savior.

But we divide over his message as well. Indeed, Jesus himself said he came not to bring peace but the sword, that belief in him will divide family members, people and nations—and even bring the sword of the living Word of God into the hearts of his followers, there to divide the bone from the marrow, the true from the false.

Peace will not come from efforts to obtain uniformity of religious belief. Indeed religion often serves to intensify conflict. Nothing bolsters one’s sense of righteousness like the conviction that God is on your side. Even if all the world were Christian, as Europe used to be, history reveals that does not bring peace. Religious disputes among Christians, as Paul’s letter shows, sprang up immediately. We witness in our time religious war in the Islamic world and give thanks that the religious wars of sixteenth century Christendom are behind us. The principle of religious liberty is well established in our law. But this doesn’t mean we can rest from patrolling the boundaries.

Which is why our greatest American president’s Second Inaugural Address is so vital to remember. Lincoln wrote as the Civil War was ending, and shortly before his own assassination, that both north and south “read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. .... The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully.”. That no

matter how much blood was spilled by the sword, yet the blood spilled by the slaver's lash remains unrequited and "as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

President Lincoln concluded with these almost scriptural words: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."

This address is among the highest peaks of our national ideals, right up there with "all men (all people, understood rightly, as we still struggle to understand) are created equal.". Yet it must be said that it still fell short of its goal. We did not achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, but sacrificed freed black slaves on the altar of white national unity through the failure of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow. "Peace among ourselves and with all nations" has proven illusive. I have made the claim above that it may be humanly impossible.

Yet I do not conclude with pessimism. Though humanism in and of itself can bring us only so far, yet there has been progress. But it has become clear to me that only in the unity of God, in the relation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the self-giving love of Christ is there true peace. This is what Paul calls the mind of Christ. It truly thinks with malice toward none and charity toward all.

And here's what I think we have to do. Not to cease from all disputes—as Paul points out later in the letter, he supposes there must always be disputes and factions (the Greek word is heresies), for in this way the truth emerges. But we as Christians must always be seeking the mind of Christ, and imitating his self-giving love. And somehow in the mind of Christ, in the act of self-giving, there is peace. There is unity in divinity—for all are encompassed in God's merciful gaze. On the human level, we will continue to act and fight for what we understand is right—and rightly so, as Lincoln said. But know that only in the mind of Christ, in the unity of divinity is there true peace.

Let us then remember that we are human and God is God. We are partial, God is the whole. We are often right in what we assert but wrong in what we deny or fail to see, for we do not think of others as we do ourselves. We see the speck in our opponent's eye, not the log in ours. We therefore must seek forgiveness, not only from God but each other. We have not loved God with our whole heart—and so we have not embraced the whole peace of God. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For that we are truly sorry and let us humbly repent. Then we can come to the table, having reconciled with sister and brother, and receive the very life—the body and blood —of Christ.

In his name, we can find our peace. Amen to that.

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