

Homily for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Service

Offered by

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Queen's House Chapel – Thursday January 18th, 2024

Texts: Genesis 18:1-8; Psalm 138; Luke 10:25-37

So, most of you know that English is not my first language. I don't have a foreign accent, but my husband Jim would say that there's one thing that betrays the fact that English is not my first language, and that's how I say my 'th' ... mother, other, brother, etc.

The operative word seems to be *to other*, so you'll hear my 'th's' a lot today. Today's fashionable practice of *othering* seems to be an appropriate focus for today's worship on Christian Unity. "Othering" is the focus of the chosen Scriptures, but in a backwards sort of way ... more on that in a few minutes.

Everyone seems to be *othering* others these days. We other others from every point on the ideological spectrum: progressive and conservative, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, white and racial minorities, Canadians and new immigrants, refugees and politicians – you name it. People are othered by others based on skin colour, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion.

Today's Russia is othering the Ukrainians. Today's Israel is othering the Palestinians. We even other ... other Christians – yep, we really do, we still do ... Catholics other Anglicans, Evangelicals other United Church folk, Lutherans other anyone who doesn't know Martin Luther, Baptists other Catholics, Orthodox other Pentecostals – you name it. If I feel offended by someone else's perspective, life choices or beliefs, and if I'm convinced that my way is the only way, social media is eager to help me make that person's life really miserable.

Of course, this divide and conquer mentality is merely the latest expression of a phenomenon that's as old as the hills. In the olden days it was called shunning; in Jesus' culture you were *othered* when belonging to the wrong tribe, such as the Samaritans. It never ends, and frankly, it's blasphemy. Othering every person who does not look like me, sound like me, believe like me, lives like me, is a glaring violation of God's foundational call to love.

Take any combination of groups, and the othering will reveal itself eventually. Oh, not always quite visibly and audibly, mind you. Some of us are pretty sophisticated about concealing our othering. We call it claiming our identity, or strengthening our group spirit. We call it building community with like-minded folk. We call it claiming our authentic selves.

Now don't get me wrong. It's important and meaningful to claim one's identity, to strengthen community with like-minded folks. But if these noble positive goals are motivated by fear or trauma, by prejudice and judgment, then we need to seriously examine ourselves. If noble goals merely feed superiority, arrogance and scorn then we're in dangerous waters, and watch out ...

Love is the DNA of Christian faith. God is Love and the love of Christ has gathered us into one, even we admit that fact kicking and screaming. Our common identity lies in the experience of God's love. (cf. Jn 3:16). We reveal that identity to the world by how we love one another (Jn 13:35).

In the Gospel selected by the churches in Burkina Faso, Jesus reaffirms the traditional Jewish teaching from Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might;" and Leviticus 19:18, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself." The Genesis account of Abraham's generous hospitality towards strangers is an othering of a radical different sort: exemplify the loving of neighbour to the extreme. But the lawyer in the Gospel doesn't waste any time: "And who is my neighbour?" Woo ... stop ... Do you hear it? Do you hear the other *othering* in this question?

The question was widely disputed in Jesus' time. Initially, loving your neighbour included fellow Israelites and resident aliens. Later, with invasions by foreign powers, neighbour did not include foreigners from occupying forces.

Over time, Judaism itself fragmented, and then loving one's neighbour only applied to one's own particular faction. And before long, limiting the definition of neighbour begins to betray the very commandments of the Almighty. From Abraham who gladly, and recklessly I may add, welcomed total strangers and fed them, today we see where this limitation of loving our neighbour takes us – in all-out war, brutal vengeance and mass destruction.

The question *who is my neighbour* remains provocative. Given our focus on Christian Unity this week, let's shine the spotlight on our own church relations. We have come a long way since the hostile exchanges of the 16th century. What began as intense arguments and reasons for parting company, have over time developed as unique strengths in each tradition. While we continue to cling to divisions, God is using those divisions to nudge us towards one another to embody the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It's an ironic illustration of the notion that for God, nothing is wasted, and everything can be transformed for good.

But as Dostoevsky said so aptly: “love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams” (from: *The Brothers Karamazov*). Marriage to my dear husband has proven the truth of these words, as I'm sure any married couple can echo.

Jim and I have spent 44 years dancing with huge differences. Each time relational disaster loomed, we learnt to dig deep into our marital vows to find our unity. Thus, an intricate web has woven itself slowly, painfully at times but surely, a web of honouring the other in his/her uniqueness as fully as we possibly can, while trusting that married love can hold us both in unity.

The Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin calls this relational movement an evolutionary dance present in all living things. De Chardin discovered a fascinating paradox, i.e. that union/communion grows deeper and stronger in and through differentiation: “The more closely an entity or group is united, the more differentiated its parts become.” According to De Chardin, the entire universe displays a differentiating movement in unison.

Richard Rohr once commented that God and the entire cosmos are about two things, and two things only: differentiation (people and things becoming themselves) and communion (living in supportive coexistence). Rohr added that physicists and biologists seem to know this better than theologians and clergy. (See: *Richard Rohr: “Where the Gospel Leads Us”*)

And if that is true, then healthy marriages and De Chardin's insight have something important to teach us in the diverse Christian traditions. Intense arguments (and massive misunderstandings if I may add) formed the reason for parting company and walking apart – an ecclesial divorce. Yet over time God transformed our differences into unique strengths in each tradition. Fancy that ... And here in this place, Queen's House, many of us have tasted and felt and seen these unique strengths as unifying.

Yet, in our day-to-day church living, while we claim to love and live like Jesus, it's still easier to turn our backs on one another. It's easier to see difference as insurmountable, even heresy. It seems easier to other one another, to limit Eucharistic hospitality, to feed mutual distrust, often by sins of omission, meaning resisting meaningful bonds of affection and wilfully ignoring dialogue, understanding and collaboration.

I mean, really, tell me: how many ordinary Christians in our churches are aware of the LAURC Covenant? Ten bishops in Saskatchewan – L-A-UkrC-RC – signed this Covenant in 2020 with several dozen practical suggestions of working together at the local level.

Very few local churches are actually engaging these suggestions. How many of our folks are aware of important ecumenical agreements, arrived at over years of faithful and persistent conversation and prayer? How many church leaders, at every level, keep their flocks in the dark about the changed ecumenical landscape with its significant breakthroughs in understanding and mutual appreciation, let alone help to bring these mountains of insight to life in their local contexts and church communities? Too often we still continue to claim that we follow Christ while continuing to *other* other Christian siblings, even though every othering of others betrays the unity Christ won for us.

Christians in Burkina Faso are confronting our joint betrayal with two illustrations from the Holy Book: Abraham recklessly welcoming strangers without setting limits to respect and generosity, thereby illustrating who is our neighbour and how to love our neighbour.

And second, Jesus responding to the age-old needling question with a parable illustrating the same reckless love as Abraham, a love that extends far beyond any limits we set daily. That's an othering of an entirely different sort than the one we favour most of the time ...

So, it behooves us to examine our hearts: How often do we perceive another with quiet judgment, failing to convey respect, to consider/honour intent and context? How can we grow a greater awareness of our own mental maps (limited as they are by definition) and how these maps affect our perceptions and attitudes? Does right relation trump right belief? Why and how? If not, why not? When is “walking together” a wishy-washy, anything-goes, ignoring-differences type of response, and when is it a call to deeper love, reconciliation and communion that challenges both parties, as marriage partners experience so often? How is it that some of our churches take reconciliation with Indigenous fellow-Canadians more seriously than reconciliation among our churches?

We're really good at softening the Gospel's shock effects. A Samaritan in Jesus' time was never considered “good” as we have become accustomed to saying. Another irony: the despised one ends up acting like Christ in love and care for the injured one. The Samaritan, an outcast, shows God's mercy and compassion, without regarding religious, ethnic, or social status or identity. The message cannot be clearer: it is not shared identities that define who our neighbour is.

Scary, really, to consider that it might not even be right belief, but right action that makes visible the living God in Christ Jesus – think of the entry exam into heaven laid out for us in Matthew 25: whatever you do to the least of these ...Once again, Jesus' vision of loving our neighbour is exposing our own narrow-mindedness. Maybe, just maybe, it is by learning to honour and cherish differences that we act as neighbours in love with each other, so to speak.

Jesus prayed that his followers would all be one (cf. *Jn 17:21*). To lose hope or stop praying and working for unity is not an option. Regardless of the cozy silos and echo chambers we still build, (compliments of Meta and all social media partners!) we are united by God's love for us in Christ, even if we struggle to show this in practice.

And so, this *Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* comes back each year. This Christian Unity week needs to come back each year until we finally embrace the message from the Almighty: in Christ we have been united in love – we're stuck with each other, like it or not. Christ has united us in a love stronger than steel and deeper than the ocean floor. No argument, no ecclesial rifts, no divorce can break that love. In Christ, we have grown legitimate diversity and differentiation held in communion by our loving God.

Our human default of *othering* others creates walls. God's default of reverse *othering* tears down walls. This place, Queen's House, has been for us all a powerful witness to Christian unity. In its nearly 66 years of operation, the Missionary Oblates have engaged in God's *othering*, thus exemplifying prophetic witness and responsible stewardship of these sacred grounds.

Their reasons for discontinuing their engagement deserves our utmost respect and profound gratitude. But I am reminded of 1989, when the Berlin Wall came crumbling down. Then QH director Glenn Zimmer wrote in the QH newsletter: 'before the famous Berlin Wall could crumble, people first began to dance on the Wall to get a taste of what life could be like if the Wall wasn't there.' 'Well,' he said, 'QH is a place where we can dance on the walls, those walls hardened by disputes and divisions, suspicions and false judgments.'

All of us have tasted in this place who we can be as church with divisions overcome and fully reconciled in Christ. That became the norm here, just look around ... look around...

Ministry and witness here have tapped our ecclesial patchwork in ways that reveal the Holy One in Christ Jesus, the one who keeps transforming disputes into life-giving diversity. In a few months, we will lose this holy place. Will anything take its place; will there be resurrection? Time will tell. Regardless, each of us urgently needs to take up the ecumenical baton so faithfully and lovingly fostered here at QH.

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, might ...
and your neighbour as yourself...
Go, and do likewise ...*

So, my dear neighbours in Christ, can we see our baptismal promises on par with marriage vows, bonding us to one another in the Body of Christ in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, until death do us part, and even beyond death? Do we have the desire and willingness to dig deep into these baptismal vows so that our differences are held in unity by an ever-deeper abiding love and regard for one another, mirroring the communion of the Trinity itself?

That is my prayer today, my heart's desire, and our life's mission in Christ ... I hope and pray that it is yours as well, for the sake of God's radical gift in Christ Jesus, and for the sake of the salvation of the world. AMEN