

Unison Opening Words ~ *Common Prayer: Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*

Almighty God, you are the King of all creation. You created order out of chaos, and you call us to strive for the peace that is not like the peace empires bring. Teach us to drop the weapons we carry in our hands, in our hearts, and on our tongues. Enable us to be soldiers of yours who destroy the weapons of our oppressors with your grace. Amen.

Traditional Service Liturgy Following Opening Hymn **and** Contemporary Service Liturgy Following The Lord's Prayer before the Scripture Reading: This We Believe Document 'Article I'

Of Faith in the Holy Trinity

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, or infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

- Romans 14:13-18.
- Today we begin our summer sermon series entitled *This We Believe*.
 - Over the next seven weeks we will explore core United Methodist beliefs.
 - Equipped with this knowledge, we will have “a fresh way to hear God’s voice, share in God’s grace, and become more like Jesus Christ.”¹
- The doctrine of the Trinity articulates how the three persons of the Godhead are in relationship with one another.
 - Our youth utilized this image (1) when studying the Trinity during Confirmation.²
 - It is a recreation of the Shield of the Trinity, which dates back to the 12th Century.
 - The shield depicts the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as fully and completely God.
 - We believe our God is 1 in 3 and 3 in 1.

¹ Will Willimon, *This We Believe* back cover.

² <https://symbolsage.com/shield-of-the-trinity/>

- Another way to say this is that there are three distinct persons of the same substance in the Godhead.
- While the same, each have “operations,” as one author describes, unique to their person in the Godhead:
 - The Father – creation; The Son – redemption; and The Holy Spirit – blessing.³
 - The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are permanently present with one another.
 - They are indivisible.
 - Through their relationship we see what awaits us not only in unity but also in eternity.
- The word *Trinity* does not appear in Scripture.
 - However, we can read about the presence and power of the Trinity in a number of passages that name each person of the Godhead altogether in one place:
 - Think of Jesus’ baptism – The Father spoke blessing from heaven over the Son as the Spirit alighted on him like a dove (Mk 1, Mt 3, Lk 3).
 - Think of Jesus’ Great Commission – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” (Mt 28:19).
 - Think of the benedictions that Paul uses to close his letters – his closing words of his second letter to the Corinthians read, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (II Cor 13:13).

³ Ibid.

- Our Scripture text for this morning is another opportunity to read about the presence and power of the Trinity.
 - What I appreciate about this passage is that Paul turns our attention to a specific function of the Trinity.
 - In Chapter 1 Paul says, “I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you – or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (vv. 11-12).
 - Here, at the outset of his letter, the Apostle identifies (2) mutual upbuilding by way of encouragement as both his motivation for and mission momentum to achieve unity – like the unity he experiences in the Godhead.
 - For the Romans to be one, for God’s people to be united, that which keeps them apart must be eliminated.
 - We might be quick to name ‘that which keeps us apart’ as *difference*.
 - Paul identifies ‘that which keeps us apart’ as *suffering*.
 - He also identifies that it is (3) a chief aim of the Trinity to relieve suffering, to the point it is eliminated, and God’s people are united.
- Our Scriptural witness evidences the Trinity’s commitment to relieving suffering:
 - In the First Testament (4) we read of the Father’s mighty actions in the Exodus as well as the Exile to free God’s people and deliver them into the promise.
 - Whereas the Ancient Near Eastern gods are forged from a goldsmith, static, stagnant, unable to answer and incapable of saving, our God who carries us from birth and in old age made us, bears us, and will save us.
 - To us God says, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me” (Isa 46:6b-7, 3-4, 9).

- The Son most vividly relieves suffering through (5) miraculous healings – through cures, exorcisms, and resurrection of the dead.
 - The Son’s miracles are not only acts of power and omnipotence; they are acts of love and mercy.
 - They are incarnations of compassion intent to relieve suffering.
- The Holy Spirit kindles, fans, and protects the flames of unity (6) specifically by cultivating resiliency in us as we enter and sustain in the tension of conversations and circumstances of discord.
 - The path to unity is not walked by shoving skeletons in the closet or sweeping concerns under the rug.
 - The path to unity is not completed by articulating a list of ‘off limits’ topics and abiding by that social convention.
 - The path to unity necessarily includes having hard conversations and doing so with compassion and generosity.
 - Friends, we are capable of this.
 - (7) We can do hard things because God is with us.
 - Therefore, **nothing** is impossible.
- The greatest spiritual skirmishes in Rome during Paul’s apostleship involve food and holy days.
 - Christianity is seeking to take root in a pagan society, and it was not a smooth transition.
 - There were Jews who had become Christians that brought with them their heritage of holy days and traditions around food preparation, regulation, and consumption.
 - There were Gentiles who had become Christians that retained their past even as they began their new future in faith.

- And there was this diverse cultural and religious center in Rome where beliefs and practices resounded with, rebounded from, and repelled against one another quite publicly.
- Paul writes into this dynamic space about the dynamic nature of God.
 - Paul writes to people at different places on and maturities in the faith journey.
 - Each is honorable. Each is precious. Each is worthy.
 - And each is to hold in common the aim of the Trinity in whom they believe – to relieve suffering so that God’s people unite.
 - “Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another” reads verse 13.
 - Our discipleship “is not simply a matter of giving up passing judgment on, or despising, a fellow Christian; (8) it is a matter of taking positive thought to see how to avoid making life difficult for one another.”⁴
 - It is a matter of taking positive thought to see how to relieve suffering for one another.
- We begin this work by positively making up our minds and then acting on those decisions that curate within us and from of us as upbuilding and mutual encouragement.
 - This is what Paul talks about in verse 14 when he says “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.”

⁴ *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary: Romans 740.*

- Anything – or more importantly anyone – is unclean to us **if we make that decision.**
- God forgive us in making those decisions, and persuade us through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ to see one another as you see us – cherished and beloved – that we would know and act after the example of Christ towards one another.
- Jesus told Peter when he presented him with the keys to the Kingdom, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19).
 - What is bound and loosed is the **result** of **our** decision making.
 - Will we bind the fruits of the spirit? Will we bind faith, hope, and love?
 - Or will we loose deception and divisiveness?
 - We will we loose suffering that will result in separation?
- “Genuine Christians grow to maturity” – from *weak* to *strong* as Paul describes – “at different rates and during that process one cannot and must not hurry or hurray them to accept positions their conscience at the moment cannot allow.”⁵
 - In fact, “actual spiritual harm is caused to people when they are [made to accept positions their conscience at the moment cannot allow], and that causing such harm is a failure in the basic Christian virtue of love.”⁶
 - We do not get very far with one another by force or under the duress of punitive action.
 - Anyone that has watched a child grow knows that maturity takes time.

⁵ Ibid., 741.

⁶ Ibid.

- And in that time, (9) the Godhead desires our sharing gentleness and generosity with one another as we grow up in faith and become more Christ-like by alleviating rather than contributing to the suffering of others.
- Our Triune God is real. Our Triune God is alive.
 - Our Triune God is actively moving in us and around us.
 - “A God who is constantly out making moves on the world produces a church and a ministry who are sent.”⁷
 - Our sent-ness, therefore, must prioritize and be predicated by our preparedness “to think through divisive issues in light of this central doctrine [so that the church] will be able to distinguish between the things that matter and the things that do not.”⁸
 - Only then will we alleviate suffering in God’s Kingdom and delight in righteousness, joy, and peace.
 - This we believe.

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- 2 – Mutual upbuilding by way of encouragement is both Paul’s motivation for and mission momentum to achieve **unity**.
- 3 – A chief aim of the Trinity is to relieve suffering.
- 4 – The Father: The Exodus and The Exile
- 5 – The Son: Miraculous Healings through Cures, Exorcisms, and Resurrection of the Dead
- 6 – The Holy Spirit: Cultivating Resilience in Discord
- 7 – We can do hard things because God is with us!
- 8 – *It is a matter of taking positive thought to see how to avoid making life difficult for one another.*
- 9 – The Godhead desires our sharing gentleness and generosity with one another as we grow up in faith and become more Christ-like by alleviating rather than contributing to the suffering of others.

⁷ Willimon, 22.

⁸ Ibid., 750.