

#10 16-17

Psalm 27:1, 4-9

Isaiah 9:1-4

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

The Light and Hope of Unity

¹²Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. ¹³He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, ¹⁴so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ¹⁵"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles – ¹⁶the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." ¹⁷From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ¹⁸As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea – for they were fishermen. ¹⁹And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." ²⁰Immediately they left their nets and followed him. ²¹As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. ²²Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. ²³Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Well, this is a countdown. 5 more sermons with me here. I have learned more from preparing to preach every Sunday, then I could have had without having this discipline. I am so grateful. There were times when I really did not know what I thought or felt about a scripture, until I started praying and writing. And I can honestly say, it has always been my greatest desire to share God with you! We all have insights, and I love to talk about these great human endeavors to understand the unknowable - and to seek the joy of being HOME in God, if only for a second! Searching for God is Wonder - Full! And sharing that search ~ and what we can see ~ is joyous!

This is what Jesus found in those he called while walking on the beach. They wanted to know more about life. There was great honor in being a fisherman! But the desire to have more from life than seeking living based on money is what destined these people to be with each other!

Today is the beginning of the week of prayer for Christian Unity. Today we are being called from all over the world to listen and follow and look at each other with boundless love and seek to follow Jesus! There is a power in acknowledging the journey of reconciliation and the goal of unity! The theme of this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is "Reconciliation-The Love of Christ Compels Us." From the website of the WCC about this theme:

It was in the context of the Reformation Anniversary that the Council of Churches in Germany took up the work of creating the resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2017. It quickly became clear that the materials for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity would need to have two accents: on the one hand, there should be a celebration of God's love and grace, the "justification of humanity through grace alone", reflecting the main concern of the churches marked by Martin Luther's Reformation. On the other hand, the materials should also recognize the pain of the subsequent deep divisions which afflicted the Church, openly name the guilt, and offer an opportunity to take steps toward reconciliation.

It seems the German Churches seem to know something about the compelling need for humanity to find ways together ~ to find ways to become one in Christ ~ to reconcile what separates us, so we can rejoice in what unites us. It was 500 years ago this year that Martin Luther nailed the 95 thesis on the Church door in Wittenberg. It was 72 years ago that the catastrophe that was the Third Reich was ended. It was 28 years ago that the people were gathering with prayers and candles to overcome the powers of oppression in the GDR. Germany knows it's struggles with unity and reconciliation. No wonder it was asked to prepare the texts for the world's churches this year.

Reconciliation is painful and hard, but for those who have gotten through it - it can be world changing! Before reconciliation - we carry the burden of not knowing how the other may react to us. We live in a false reality of who the other truly is, and even who we are. We carry the pain of separation and the risk of making the same mistakes again and again, until we have been freed of our own ignorance.

After reconciliation - we have learned that the courage to speak our perceptions, and to receive the perceptions of others can bring a great deal of pain - but that pain is only temporary. When we share our pain of separation, when we attempt to make right what feels so wrong, we plunge through the darkness of our own souls and receive a great light of hope,

our burden has been removed, there is room for more love. We learn courage and we practice being aware of those times when our egos have barred us from the truth. And the more truth we desire - the less power that ego has over our souls.

This, I think, is what was meant when it was said, "The Love of Christ Compels Us." Compels US! The word compel, according to the online dictionary, means, "force or oblige (someone) to do something." Some synonyms are: force, pressure, press, push, urge; bring about (something) by the use of force or pressure; drive forcibly. It's origin is from the late Middle English: from Latin *compellere*, from *com-* 'together' + *pellere* 'drive.' So - are we driven together by some external force? We don't like being forced to do something, normally.

But when we contemplate the idea that we are compelled by a force from within us - we may see this differently. The love of Christ is such a mystical force. So much so that we have the Gospel from today where Jesus is just walking along, and, almost like they are in a trance, the people drop what they are doing and follow him! Love is truly more powerful than any other force on this earth. Time and time again, powers have tried to use violence and threats of violence, abuse and removal of physical needs to compel people, and that stuff may work for a while, but in the long run, love compels humanity to greater powers! Greater lives! Love - pure love - like that of Jesus Christ, drive humanity together with more resiliency than any other forces!

From the texts prepared by the WCC for this day:

Horst Sindermann, a member of the GDR leadership until the fall of the wall in 1989, noted, "We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything, just not for candles and prayers." This is why the division of Christians and the reconciliation we seek are represented by the construction and the dismantling of a wall. This can become a symbol of hope for any situation in which a division seems insurmountable. Thus the construction of a symbolic wall at the confession of sin, the visible presence of this wall to form a cross as a sign of hope, give us the courage to name these terrible divisions and to overcome them with the help of God."

The worship service that is offered in on the WCC page has the service building and tearing down a wall in the service, to represent the sin of us humans believing that we are not one, and the power of Christ to tear down these walls and create a place where God's love reigns!

We have heard it said, today and many other days ~ "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light!" This is what reconciliation feels like - where once was a blockade - is now freedom. Where once was ignorance is now inspiration. Where was once loneliness and fear is now companionship and hope! There is light and hope in striving for unity in Christ! And the love that we have experienced - the love that we desire - that love compels us from the inside out - to be one! That internal force and craving is more powerful than any principalities on this earth.

In closing I would like to remind everyone here of another scripture. Romans 8:31-39:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And in that love we are empowered to serve - no! We are compelled to reconciliation and justice in the name of Jesus Christ! AMEN!