



The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL)

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Sermon for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:2

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Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1 Corinthians 1:26-2:2)

Our theme for this week of Christian unity comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, a church that he founded after encountering many struggles in Greek cities to the north, a community where he stayed longer than any other, a church which he visited at least three times, a congregation to whom two long letters are addressed in the New Testament, while scholars believe he may have written perhaps five letters altogether, and a community where Paul developed deep and lasting relationships with people like Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos, Stephanus, and Phoebe the deacon.

At the end of the letter Paul writes the great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, where he lays out for us the earliest Christian Creed that Christ died according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to many believers including Peter and James, to the twelve, and to even 500 at one time. This belief in the resurrection was at the heart of the Christian *Kerygma* and the heart of the Christian hope. Without it Paul's preaching would be in vain. Yet all of us who are in Christ look forward to that last trumpet, to the final victory over death when we will all be changed—not merely changed in our resurrection bodies and in the fullness of our understanding, but also changed in this world, and

especially in our relationships with one another, experiencing true Christian unity. One in Christ, forever.

Our week of prayer for Christian unity is carried out with that understanding in mind, with the realization of human limitations that unity is something that we strive for, we look forward to in hope, we pray with all longing and expectation. No matter how well our attendance is during this week of services, it is only partial of what it might be. No matter how strong and sincere the good feelings and good will that we experience, it is only a fraction of what lies in store for us. No matter how fervent and intense our common prayers, this is only a foretaste of the feast to come, when we will all be changed by the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We all need changing. We all need to move closer together in Christian unity. All of our churches need to live in a spirit of repentance and forgiveness starting with my own Lutheran Church. We all need to focus our efforts more toward oneness in Christ.

Paul must have felt the same way about those first-century Corinthians, who were diverse in ethnicity and cultural backgrounds, and who seemed hopelessly divided. "For it is reported to me that there is quarreling among you," Paul writes in the very first verses of this letter. "Each one of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' 'I belong to Apollos,' 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.'" Their Eucharistic services are anything but communion as some are drunk and others are hungry. They are so wrapped up in individualism, that some claim superiority on the basis of wisdom, while others claim privilege on the basis of spectacular spiritual gifts which are disruptive to worship and which divide and humiliate rather than build up and encourage.

How can the church be a living witness when it is so divided? How can the church reflect the unity of the faith, when it overemphasizes externals and periphery matters? How can the church be the church if it lives in the glory of the past holding on to attitudes of superiority toward others? How can the church be changed toward a greater unity, when it sometimes acts as if it has already won the victory by its own actions and decisions? How can the church show unity when it refuses to move closer to the model set by the living Christ?

And so Paul announces quite clearly and quite simply a singular focus of teaching and proclamation, of confession and prayer. The Church is one when it looks to the suffering servant as its model and source of strength and nourishment.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

Keep your eyes on the cross of Jesus, Paul announces to the Corinthians.

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come
proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.
For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and
him crucified. (1 Cor. 2:1-2)

Christ crucified is the source of our salvation, our one faith, our one hope, the source of our unity as children of the same heavenly Father, washed of our sins by one baptism, the source of our unity as a worshipping community of diverse individuals, cultural backgrounds, and traditions, and of a variety of expressions of liturgy, prayer, and song, but gathered around one table, one loaf, one cup, and gathered and attentive to proclamation and study of the word. The word “Community” means “sharing in unity.” Not an organization, not a club, not a corporation, not an NGO, not a management company, but the body of Christ on earth in our broken world together. This image of the body of Christ is a celebration of unity in diversity, where we need each other, where when one member rejoices we all rejoice together, and when one member suffers we all suffer together. This is what we call reconciled diversity. The church as the body of Christ—the body of Christ crucified, the body of Christ, the suffering servant, still looking forward to that final victory when we will all be changed in Him and by Him. The church as the body of Christ, still subject to suffering, still wounded, still filled with imperfections, and still dependent upon our regular and frequent repentance, forgiveness, absolution, and reconciliation. This is the church today, the body of Christ. And that’s why Paul reminds the divided Corinthians, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” This is the reason that we, the churches of Jerusalem are called today to see the suffering Christ in the other churches, in order to be joined in one communion. And I still pray that the day may come that we can all concelebrate the Holy Eucharist together as a culmination of this communion.

Finally, Paul says, “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” In many ways that could apply to all of us here—who of us is of noble birth? (in the world’s eyes merely an invented people). Who of us is powerful? (in the media’s eyes we are ignored). Who of us is wise? (in the politician’s eyes, we have nothing intelligent to offer). Who of us is influential? (in the eyes of the electorate, we are but a tiny 2%, we are nothing).

“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.”

What else might Paul say about us in Jerusalem and the Holy Land? Consider your callings, brothers and sisters: small in size, timid in voice, tainted and smeared in reputation, limited in movement, living in fear and insecurity, still waiting for peace and justice, but waiting in expectation. If we are to boast, we can only boast in the Lord. Yet remaining steadfast and resilient, rooted in the land, and fervent in our faith and hope, we do not despair, but keep our eyes on the cross of Jesus, continuing to preach Christ and him crucified, carrying in our bodies the mystery and the cross and the resurrection, and we look forward to the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we will all be changed.

I believe that Paul really knew what he was doing in focusing his message on the cross of Christ because it is central to us as people who walk in the Lord’s steps everyday of our lives. The cross of Christ is not merely an episode in the life of

our savior, it is not merely a doctrine which we confess, it not merely a piece of jewelry we wear. The cross is our way of life. The cross is our unity. The cross is our experience. The cross is what we know and understand better than anything else, because Jesus spoke to Peter and the other disciples, "If anyone wants to follow me, let him or her, take up their cross and follow."

To those of us among the local Christians, I call upon you to take up your cross and follow Jesus. This has been our history in this very land, in this very city, where Jesus walked, suffered, died, and rose again, and where the early Christians were bold in their witness, even as they struggled, even as they suffered. Christianity with all its weakness has survived in this land for 2,000 years. It has never controlled or ruled this country. It never had wealth or power. But the Christian Church survived because of its living witness. That witness called her to be involved in society, to offer a ministry of education and of healing to all people regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or political affiliation.

The church today is again called to be bridge-builders and ambassadors of reconciliation. We are called to play a role in building a modern civil society, but also to inject into society the common values of all religions that promote coexistence, peace, and justice, and accepting the other. We are called to a prophetic role, speaking the truth to power. Only when the church is involved in society, and especially among the suffering, then it will have a future. For the church in Jerusalem is the church of the cross and the resurrection.

Just two weeks ago *Yedot Ahranot* newspaper published an article titled, "The End of Arab Christianity." With the Arab Spring surrounding us, we fear that in many places it is turning to winter. While the spring began just a year ago with individuals spontaneously undertaking a non-violent struggle for dignity, seeking the values of democracy and freedom for all, including freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and support for equal human rights, including those of women. Yet in many places, we are afraid that they are losing ground to extremists, who may use of democratic system to come to power, extremists who reject the equal contributions of women, extremists who value exclusion rather than inclusion.

Even in these circumstances, we will continue to be steadfast and not emigrate. For we are people who carry a message—a message of love, a message of moderation, a message of undying hope—a message entrusted to us that is so essential in these days as the situation in the entire Middle East continues to develop. We are called to remain because the Lord called us to be brokers of justice and instruments of peace in the Holy Land.

As local Christians I appeal to you: Remain steadfast. Do not give up hope. Remember your calling. Be a source for moderation in the midst of a sea of extremism. Take up your Cross and continue to follow Jesus. For we will all be changed by the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And to our partners, the expatriate Christians, who live with us and who witness alongside us, I call upon you also to take up your crosses in an accompaniment relationship with the local churches. Walk with us as the Emmaus disciples and Jesus walked together on that first Easter afternoon, listening to one another, learning about the current situation in Jerusalem, coming to understand that

important biblical hermeneutic “that the Christ must suffer many things, suffer, and die.” Come abide with us. Come share our bread. Come and see. Offer us words of encouragement and hope. Hold back from the temptation to sit in the chair of judgment. Do not cease to pray for us, and we keep you in our daily prayers. And remember, you are not called to follow us, just as we are not called to follow you. Together we take up our crosses and follow the one sent to bring us life and life abundantly to this country. And together we are called to be a living witness in this land of resurrection.

And as we sit here this evening on this cold January day, at the beginning of another year, we are mindful that our prayers and meditation, our songs and our psalms of praise, all our worship in this week of unity takes place in the shadow of the resurrection, just footsteps away from the empty tomb. Let us live and witness in this spirit of the resurrection that started from Jerusalem. Let us revive our conviction that the things that unite us as Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical are much more than those that divide us. Let us put aside our differences and listen to the voice calling to us to be his witnesses in Jerusalem and in the whole world. “If Christ is not raised,” as Paul says, “then our preaching is in vain, and our faith is in vain.” (1 Cor. 15:13) “But thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57). For we shall all be changed!

May the peace that surpasses all human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

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