

*“One Church, Indivisible...”**

Psalm 133; Ephesians 2:11-22

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People from the First Presbyterian Church of Lake Charles could tell you that I do not ordinarily “read from my notes” when I preach. I will change that today...not because I did not prepare for this service, but simply because I do not want to leave anything out on this important day.

At times over the past months, we have joked hollowly about “the elephant in the room.” And today, it would do no one a service to deny that the elephant is sitting here. This is the last time the Presbytery of South Louisiana as many of us have known it will gather around the Lord’s Table. As has happened at other times in the history of our branch of the Church of Jesus Christ and our nation, the demands of conscience are pushing some of us to seek a new denominational home and others to remain in this visible manifestation of Christ’s body. Words born of conviction have been spoken. Lawsuits have been filed. People have been hurt, and hearts have bled.

I. The Work of Christ

There was a profound enmity some two thousand years ago in the setting where the Church of Jesus Christ first began to bloom. The gap between Jew and Gentile was both deep and bitter. It was dug by centuries of mutually inflicted slights and filled with bitter memories and even ugly humor. About fifty years ago, the compilers of *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* said that the gulf between Gentile and Jew was regarded in the ancient Roman Empire as more unbridgeable than the modern disparity between East and West, Communist and non-Communist.”¹ The barrier between the two groups was as real as the old Berlin Wall that came down to great celebrating in 1989.

In this setting, Ephesians proclaims that in Jesus Christ not only are Jew and Gentile reconciled with God, but they are reconciled *with one another*. By his incarnation, his death on the cross, and his resurrection, Jesus Christ has knocked down that wall of separation. It is a *spiritual reality*. The two groups might not fully embrace each other. They might choose not to enter, from their part, the fullness of the new reality in Christ. Psalm 133 sounds wonderful. It is far from what we have experienced in recent times. The point in the Psalm is that the unity enjoyed among God’s people is ultimately God’s gift. Like any gift, we can choose not to open it or even return it. But where hearts are opened to God’s reconciling work in Christ, there is peace, and there is celebration.

The Greek verb translated “destroy” is *luo*. Dr. Wallace Carr and I could name a professor of Greek who in the Summer of 1985 drilled a number of Greek conjugations into his students. I can still remember “*luo, lueis, luei*” and the basic, most common

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meaning, “to loose, to set free.” It is used in the Gospels where Jesus “sets free” an individual from sickness or spiritual oppression or physical disability. Jesus also frees people from age-old feuds. Jesus frees his people from bondage to old bitterness.

II. *What Does This Mean for Us?*

Now—I am not going to stand here and plead with some of you not to leave this presbytery or denomination. The reality is that I suspect that course of action has already been firmly decided. We have probably not all been fully “in communion” for a long time, and a wall of frustration and resentment has gone up over the years, brick by brick. We Presbyterians do say we believe in “The Sovereignty of God,” and that Jesus Christ is Head of the Church. Perhaps he has called some of us to go in a different direction as surely as he has called most of us to remain in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). “Reconciliation” for us may well not mean that we stay together in a visible denomination, a presbytery quantifiable in documents and statistics. The reconciling work of Christ surely applies to the *manner* of our parting now, and our *future*, as well.

These past few years have not been the first time that Presbyterians in South Louisiana have had intense disagreements. Early in our history a gifted preacher, the Reverend Theodore Clapp, was called to preach in New Orleans. He was a powerful speaker, but he skated on the thinnest ice in the pond of orthodoxy. Mr. Clapp eventually declared his disagreement with some key tenets of the Westminster Standards. The Presbytery of Mississippi put him on trial for heresy, and the process was both lengthy and bitter. Clapp wrangled especially with Dr. George Potts, the chief prosecutor, and the Rev. Benjamin Chase, the clerk. They parted as enemies when in 1832 Mr. Clapp was “defrocked” and joined the Unitarian Church.

Years passed. One day Dr. Potts and Mr. Chase were visiting a beach up North. They stood gazing out to sea, caught up in the beauty and majesty before them. Suddenly, each felt a hand fall gently in his shoulder and heard a familiar voice...and it said...“*and Satan also came.*” It was none other than the once Rev. Mr. Clapp. The three had a good visit that day, and in spite of all that had gone on years before, they became fast friends.² God delights in surprises, especially when God’s people are sure they have declared a matter or a relationship closed.

III. *Who Knows What the Holy Spirit Will Do in the Future?*

In the meantime—if we are going to part—*may we do so respecting one another, and loving one another as sisters and brothers in Christ.* That means respecting one another’s consciences, whether they pull a friend or family member to go or to stay. It will mean respecting the integrity of one another’s denominations.

May we be open to what Christ may call us to do in the future. I take no pleasure in saying this, but there *will be* other hurricanes that will come to Louisiana. They came to our shores well before Katrina and Rita. They came before Audrey and Betsy. They will come again. And the winds and storm surges and falling trees will not differentiate between EPC and PCUSA, between “Traditional” and “More Light.” If and when another day comes when our communities are battered and hurting, and our members with them, may we be ready to work together in ministry and relief in every way that we can.

5 *May we remember that we are bound together, forever, in Christ.* That is not always welcome news. Some disagreements have been so profound that they have led to this parting. There will soon be a new “Visible Church” Presbyterian presence in South Louisiana. But spiritually, we are bound together inextricably in the “invisible Church” that belongs to Christ alone. As we gather *visibly together* at this Table, let us never forget that we are tied together in ways that cannot be broken by votes and decrees. And may we all permit ourselves to be prepared for whatever surprises our reconciling God may spring upon us in times to come.

Here today, the past is being closed. Let us not forget, now or ever, that the future is not in our hands or in the hands of civil or church courts, but in the hands of God.

Notes

1. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, (1962), Volume 4, page 17.
2. Penrose St. Amant, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in Louisiana* (1961), page 42.