

Our nation has always been a melting pot. Since the time of the first European contact, we have been a nation of immigrants from other places. There's a whole industry with companies like ancestry.com that has developed around finding out who your ancestors are and where they are from. We have always been different from one another. Because of those perceived differences in origin or language, skin color or religion, since those early days divisions have grown up among us, often with one group putting down another as inferior to make themselves look good or feel important. We struggle toward unity and sometimes we find it in shared ideals, shared values, a common identity as Americans. But underneath those differences continue, sometimes to be celebrated, sometimes to divide.

Over the last couple of years, it seems that the divisions have been emphasized and made deeper. Loud voices have been heard about issues like immigration and Muslims and poor people. We've heard the cries of "Black lives matter" and "Police lives matter", each group raising legitimate concerns, but all we've seen is fighting, no real progress toward real solutions. Social media and cable news networks only make it worse, as we listen and respond only to opinions that agree with our own and everything is set up as us versus them with no common meeting ground for what we share.

So we find ourselves lining up and yelling at each other or yelling about each other with no real understanding of where the other person is coming from and no real conversation taking place. At best, we end up shaking our fists at the TV and muttering under our breath. At worst, we end up in Charlottesville, filled with anger and hatred toward those on the other side, people we don't even dignify with the name "human being".

Yet in the midst of all these divisions, the anger and hatred wasn't all that could be seen at Charlottesville. Through the streets of the town, led by clergy from many races and religions, there was another march, a march that proclaimed that hatred and division is not all there is, that we are better than

that, that we have more in common than that, that we are all not only human but related to one another, brothers and sisters, aunts and cousins, all part of the human family.

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day when we Presbyterians also confirm a commitment to peacemaking. Rarely has that commitment been more important than it is right now. Often we think of peacemaking as something that happens on a grand scale and something that happens far away, as when two nations make a treaty for peace, or as people act to bring peace and mercy in the midst of war. But the peacemaking we are called to this day is peacemaking in our own country where the rift of anger and misunderstanding threatens to tear us apart. Yet in the midst of all these divisions, all this history that stands between us, all these fundamental differences in the way we understand what is, where are we to find a starting place?

For us Christians, the starting place is the same as it has ever been. In Christ, who is our peace. In the time of Apartheid in South Africa, with divisions between black and white enforced by law, divisions even more glaring and painful than those that now face us, the reformed church, part of our own church family, sought a way forward. This was a mostly white church, yet In a statement now known as the Belhar Confession, they boldly stated that it is in Christ that we find our unity, a unity that transcend all human boundaries, including those of race and they proclaimed that the church must demonstrate this unity in love. This confession was a key piece in helping people move forward to eradicate the injustice of apartheid and transform not only their church but their nation. That confession, part of which we'll use as our affirmation of faith this morning, became part of our denomination's Book of Confessions, part of the constitution of our church, this past year. If you know Presbyterian process, you'll understand that this was a long time coming – many years in the works. I don't think it was any coincidence – in fact, I think it was an

act of the Holy Spirit – that it was just now at this time in our history that this word, this affirmation of faith has come to us. It is in Christ that we find our unity, and it is through Christ that we will find our way forward as we live out that unity.

That way forward starts with these words from Philippians: “Do nothing out of selfish or conceit, but in humility, regard others as better than yourselves...Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, who did not regard equality with God something to be exploited, but emptied himself, being found in human likeness.” Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus, who literally put himself in the place of the other, in the place of the more vulnerable, in the place of the powerless. How do we put ourselves in that place?

Last year, our presbytery gave out a what they called a “dream grant”, seed money to make a congregation’s dream a reality. They voted to give the money to FUSE, a group of which Swarthmore and Wallingford Presbyterian churches are a part, but also Temple Shalom and some of the churches in Chester. What this group tries to do is quite simple: give people a chance to talk, really talk, in no-holds-barred conversation and get to know each other, to learn about lives and families, yes, but also talk about the hard stuff. The way they do this is to give out gift cards to people so they can go get a cup of coffee or lunch together. The gift cards are so that no one is beholden to another and they can meet on equal ground. And then they talk. Bridging the gap between urban and suburban, black and white, rich and poor, they meet on common ground, exploring what separates them but also what they share, asking each other the questions they’ve always wanted to ask but didn’t dare, and listening to the answers. This is one simple way of putting yourself in the place of the other.

Simple as it is, this approach has power. There is one black man who made a point of seeking out and getting to know Ku Klux Klan members across the country, not facing them in angry confrontation, just getting to know them and letting them know him. Many had never really even talked to a black man

before. And after conversations, sometimes after years of conversations, because of this relationship of man to man, people began to leave the Klan. Not in a stream, but a trickle, because they had discovered that the other was not who they thought he was.

This is peacemaking. This is reconciliation. In South Africa, after apartheid, they had a peace and reconciliation commission, where people came and told the truth both about what they had done and what had been done to them. This commission allowed the people to move on beyond what they had been and into the new reality. Sometimes there was forgiveness. Sometimes there was healing. But there was truth telling on common ground and sometimes that was enough. That had to be enough.

What happened in South Africa was formal and institutionalized. Maybe it needed to be in that context. But here, already, the truth telling and the listening are happening in small ways that may not shake the earth under our feet but that does give us a way to move ahead. So on this peacemaking Sunday, I have a challenge for you. Get out of the silo of talking and listening to people who agree with you. Find someone who is different from you. You probably already know someone who might fit the bill. It might be someone with different politics or a different race or different abilities or different gender or sexual orientation. Then, with the mind of Christ in you, that mind that doesn't put yourself first, but puts the other first, the mind that doesn't make you the important one but makes them the important one, go and talk to them and listen to them. Hear their story and their pain. Tell your story and your pain. And look for the common ground that is between you. I promise it is there.

It is in these small first steps that we begin to find the unity that Christ offers to us all. May the peace of Christ be with us all. Amen.

