

## Sermon for Candlelight Jan. 19, 2020

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Text: [John 17:20-26](#)

**NOTE:** *The text of this sermon is drawn from an audio recording of the sermon given Jan. 19, 2020.*

So did you guys know as human beings we sometimes don't get along? It's a shock, right, to all of you? It's especially a shock to my children this weekend. Let me tell you, people tend to fight and have conflict, right? Republicans, Democrats, Warren vs Sanders according to CNN right now. And because of the weekend it is ... and I want to look hip ... Packers vs. Bears don't like each other or Vikings vs Packers don't like each other or New England and any other NFL team, am I right? I know something. (I really don't know much.)

But we find reasons to not get along. Oh, it's the Week of Christian Unity. Sounds pretty good. Right? In the midst of all this discord, we have a week that calls us to Christian unity. I love it. I want some time to be together -- community -- especially if it means that everybody can realize that they need to think like me and act like me and realize that I'm right. Like, it's gonna be the most unified week ever. So if you guys can join me in that, that'd be great. Right?

That's sometimes how we think about unity or call for unity. Unity my way. The thing is the Week of Christian Unity falls a few days after Martin Luther King Jr's birthday and saint day and before his national holiday where we celebrate the work of that man that we are called to carry on. So in the midst of that, as we think about a week of Christian unity, I need to admit that I get uncomfortable. You see, April 12 1963, MLK was sitting in the Birmingham Jail, not by choice, not visiting somebody. Somebody snuck in a newspaper to him and in it was a letter from eight clergy making a statement that was titled "A Call for Unity." And these eight white Alabama clergy members went on to discuss what was wrong with MLK and his movement. You see, dear people, oftentimes the call for unity is by those that are already in privilege and power as a way to try to keep other people quiet. We have a way of trying to claim unity from those spaces that we can maintain control so that we don't have to be the ones that get uncomfortable, so that we don't have to be the one in tension. On April 16, the Letter from Birmingham Jail was published. And it is a remarkable piece of Martin Luther King's work. And it is long, so don't worry, I'm not reading at all to you. But we're going to live with it a little bit tonight. You see, one of the things that he wrote in that letter was "I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years, I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate, I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the negro's great stumbling block in his stride towards freedom is not the white citizen counselor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice, who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice." I think you could sub out "unity" and "peace." And there's many in our society that say, let's be unified. Therefore, we can't have any tension, which is false.

So I happen to have the joy of getting to share my life with another person. And in our marriage ceremony we did kind of a symbolic thing that happens in a lot of marriage ceremonies when two people are joining their lives together. Sometimes during the worship service, they will each go up and

have a candle that kind of represents them. Sometimes the parents have lit it for them. There's various little rituals you can do with it. And after their vows that they've made to each other they come up each taking their candles and light what's called a unity candle. Have some of you seen this done? Yeah, we are called to be unified with a partner that we're going to spend our life with. Here's the thing I can tell you -- being unified to my fabulous spouse is not an absence of tension. I love that man deeply. But there can be tension, trust me; it's not just in my children.

You see, the thing is that Unity doesn't come from the absence of tension. The unity I feel with my spouse is a unity that comes because I am more known in that space than almost any other space that I embody. In fact, he knows DK in her crappiest and in her craziest, and in my most joyful (moments); I am more seen and known and safe. You see, it's a tension of unity that's involved in a space of respect of love, of kindness. As a mother, I hate to read it every time, but it comes out in articles all the time, probably because most of us mothers need to know it, that studies have shown that kids behave worst with their mothers, especially toddlers. And the theory is that the reason that is where you have toddlers, preschoolers, young children act out is because as they are trying to test out this world and understand boundaries and where things are and who they are, (and) the safest place to do that is in their mother's love, because they know that they are joined with their mother and when that relationship is one that is filled with respect, and safety and love, there's some space or tension also abides. Because, dear people, we are human beings and human beings don't always agree on everything. We don't always get along.

King went on to write. "In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievance would get to the power structure."

When I was in school, in college, I had the opportunity to serve on the National Board of the Lutheran Youth Organization. We were gathered from all over the country and got to fly to Chicago or sometimes other places for these longer weekends to try to think about what is the church calling people to and what are we as young leaders calling the church to. Early on, on that board, one of the things that we did was went through what was called at that time and anti racism training. There's different names that these types of trainings can have happen. And at this training, we started by forming a really long line and in the ballroom, hand in hand. I had Meredith on my right, and Nate on my left, and for those of you that haven't done these sort of trainings or a privilege walk, our facilitator would invite us to take steps forward or backwards depending on various life experiences. Those of us that had parents that had gone to college might take a step forward, those of us that had experience being called an Oreo might take a step backwards. Those of us that lived in fear of violence on our block, or in our school, took a step backwards. Those of us that felt like our home was a safe environment took a step forward. Meredith and I were virtually hand in hand the whole time. My friend, Nate -- at one point we were holding fingers, and that moment that that separated was one of the hardest moments I'd experienced. You see, I came from small town Minnesota and Iowa. There were realities that I had never had to consider. I had never had disgust in my world. I'd never had disgust, even in my classrooms, and all of a sudden was making it clear that there were parts of his life that I didn't have any concept around. We hadn't even begun to discuss. Nate was gracious and was willing to walk with me over those years and in years since to help me better understand my privilege, my place and the systems in this world. I can tell you that that weekend, my body felt tension. I can tell you that that weekend was super uncomfortable. I wasn't

sure what questions to even ask or what to even say. But what I knew was Nate was my brother in Christ, and I wanted to be connected with him. And yet somehow I noticed as our fingertips separated, that if I wasn't willing to understand his world, his life, his experience, that connection would only be so deep.

Dear people, we are called to be unified with one another, but not in a false surface unity, not in one where I, in my privilege, get to control that which can be known about you and your experiences. This section of scripture that you heard tonight is actually a prayer. If you listen closely, you hear that Jesus is in conversation with God the Father and thank you, Sophia, it gets confusing, but I think it's important to the dance. You're in me and I'm in you, and they're in us. And they're in me, and I'm in them and they're with each other. Right? It's like this swirl that happens, because, dear people, the unity that we have with one another can be best experienced when we recognize God that comes to be unified with us, Christ, who comes to live incarnate, to abide with us, to live in this world, to live in this tension, to be a God that brings reconciliation, justice, grace, forgiveness. And I don't know about you but when I read the gospel stories, I don't think the disciples were always civil. I think there were lots of times that they were saying, Who was he talking to now? What does he want us to do now? Where are we going now? Lord, the boat is rocking. Do you really want to talk to them? Where are we eating? You see Jesus over and over and over, went and sat with those that He was told not to be unified with, ate with those who shouldn't have eaten with.

A while back. I had opportunity to join members of my diaconate, so deaconesses and deacons with the LDA that chose to go and be a part of kind of a long weekend looking at issues around race and how do we do that as faithful people? And what does that look like? It was held down in Texas and I was with a deaconess I never met until I got down there. She was unable to have to come to some of our conferences. The first day she realized she was placed at my table. We had round tables, and this is her posture the whole afternoon and evening, right? At one point we said, "so share your name and why you're here and what brought you," you know, and people are sharing about kind of their kind of call to be in that space and how they hope God will speak to them and help them understand. And this dear deaconess, who we will call Jane to protect the guilty, said "I'm Jane, I came because Lisa Polito kept calling me and I haven't seen most of you in a long time, and it's in Texas. So I figured I should show up." This is the executive director that lives over there. I'm like, "Cool, so she really wants to be here. This is gonna be a fun three days." Second day, same sort of thing. We'd go into thoughtful conversation and there was just six of us at our table the whole time. And I'd think, "Oh, my gosh, I'm so glad I'm not the speaker or the facilitator of this cold room." And then came the last day and there was conversation about what does this call us to and where's the gift and the challenge, and her hand went up. And I said (to myself), "What's going to happen?"

And she said, "I was raised in the South. And I guess now I can say that how people would label it, my parents were racists. I heard about colored people all the time and how lazy they were. And now I live in Texas and I go to the grocery store, and there's this language circling around me that I don't understand. It's like gnats in my ear." And then she said, "And then I realized the only way I can get rid of the sin that I'm feeling towards these people is to take a breath and claim them as children of God. It is only through the lens of Jesus, that I can get past the lies that I was shaped with my whole life. That's why I need Jesus." And she sat down, probably the most truth spoken in that entire three days.

You see, again, we like to be nice. And niceness sometimes means that we're not always honest with ourselves with each other. And when we aren't allowed to bring our full self created in the image of God, we oftentimes also put up blinders to see the image of God in the other, to invite Christ into that space, to teach us a new kind of unity, a unity that comes because Christ abides with us. And Christ abides with God and God with us and us with God, us with each other. And through that unity the world might know God's love, not because I get it right all the time, but because when I am honest about my failings and about my sin, and those places that I need my eyes and my ears and my heart opened, God's Spirit enters into that space and helps me to see the image of God in those that the world might tell me is unclean, unwelcome. That tax collector, that sinner, that prostitute, that person I disagree with. After all, people I really don't like are those that I feel persecute in Christ's name. And then I look at scripture, and there's this guy named Saul trying to kill all the Christ followers. Even Saul is met on the road by God. The light overcomes the darkness and he's forgiven and goes on to write letter after letter after letter that you're "forced" to hear on Sunday nights and Sunday morning from Scripture.

So I join in prayer that the hope that Christ claims in this hope for unity that Christ might enter me tonight as I reach out to receive that body and blood, that I reach out to receive with my brothers and sisters and siblings all over this world that looked different than me, even believe different than me and in that beautiful diversity we are shaped into the body of Christ.