

A Christ-like “Unity”

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31

I tell you, siblings, the time is short. From now on, those with spouses should live as though they had none. Those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for, and those who rejoice should live as though they had nothing to laugh about. Buyers should conduct themselves as though they owned nothing, and those who have to deal with the world should live as if all their dealings meant nothing—for the present form of this world is passing away.

I'll confess that up until today I have avoided preaching on Apostle Paul – a 1st century missionary - Mostly because well, Paul and I have a complicated relationship. We do not always agree. For whatever reason, two weeks ago when I was reviewing the lectionary, I was like okay – I'm ready. Let's do this. Second coming of Christ? No problem.

On Thursday of this past week, I asked myself what were you thinking? So, I put on my boxing gloves and headgear (because this is what I imagine I am wearing when I read Paul) alllll ready like I was meeting him face to face on a Zoom call for a debate. Compassionately of course, which I am sure comes across with my boxing gloves.

With great bravery, I opened my bible and read this passage again. Two feelings emerged for me. Interestingly enough, they were the exact two feelings I felt when watching the Inauguration on Wednesday. Uneasiness and at the same time, relief. All day I was waiting for something bad to happen. I am sure many -if not all of you- were also afraid after witnessing the violent attacks on the Capitol just two weeks prior.

At the same time, I was in good spirits. I was feeling genuinely hopeful. I mean we swore in our first woman vice president, a woman of color vice president! That is something HUGE to celebrate.

And there are also the little celebrations...we watched and listened to the president preach love and peace, not hate and violence. And I do not think I have ever been so excited for a White House press meeting as I was Wednesday night. As I watched, I turned to my wife, Jackie – I was like is a civil, respectful conversation really happening right now?

As much as my spirits were lifted, I still felt uneasy. If you were OR are feeling excited, relieved, uneasy, fearful... maybe afraid that something like the Capitol could happen again, maybe afraid that this country will become complacent again...and pretend racism is in the past...maybe angered for those same exact reasons. You certainly do not need me to tell you that all of that all those reactions are faithful ones. We can celebrate AND be vigilant.

As I read our passage for today, I also felt uneasy and relieved. Relief as I read the words: *for the present form of this world is passing away*. Perhaps it is because I am reading this in the context of this week... in the context of this year...but right now I am like yeah, I am over this pandemic and totally ready to say goodbye to the present state of this world.

And on Wednesday, it kind of felt like the present form was passing away... as we said goodbye to Trump's border wall and his Muslim Ban AND welcomed a second coming of Christ in the form of a renewed commitment to the Paris Climate Agreement, World Health Organization and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA.

That certainly has not always been my reaction to this kind of language in scripture. But it oddly feels hopeful right now?

And then there is the uneasiness when I read: *Those who mourn should live as though they had nothing to mourn for.* That just does not sit right with me. Not now. Not after this year. A year of great mourning. Mourning loved ones who died.... Mourning time we have lost with loved ones... Mourning hugs, shared meals, singing together... We are mourning all of it and so much more.

Honestly, I must have read that verse over and over again... and repeatedly flipped through my Queer Biblical Commentary, my Jewish Annotated New Testament and several online commentaries- conservative and progressive-, trying so hard to find something hidden in this verse that would make me feel better... but it just felt like I was trying to jam in that last piece of a puzzle, realizing no matter how much I tried, it just would not fit...

When I could not get that last piece to fit in the puzzle... I decided to write a response letter to Paul and it read: Dear Paul, how can you tell someone in mourning to live as though they have nothing to mourn for? For our world has much to mourn for. And much to rejoice in. How does that take away from our commitment to Christ? Love, Jaz

I kept this letter up on my screen as I thought more about this past week.

As MSNBC was playing in the background I heard that word again... a word we have all heard a lot lately... and that is: Unity.

President Biden's inaugural speech itself was about unity. He said:

To overcome these challenges – to restore the soul and to secure the future of America – requires more than words. It requires that most elusive of things in a democracy: Unity.... Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: Bringing America together. Uniting our people. And uniting our nation. I ask every American to join me in this cause. Uniting to fight the common foes we face.

He assured our nation that he will be a president for all Americans – those who voted for him and those who did not.

Afterward his speech, a news reporter (I wish I could remember who) said she felt like Biden was advocating for a unity that would work together against lies, against racism, and not so much a union of happy people holding hands. Looking back at his words, I can see that, and I must say that the news reporter's perspective helped me address some uneasiness I feel when I hear the word, "unity."

Our very own Lexi helped me even more and she gave me permission to share her thoughts with you this morning– she said that there are complicated dynamics within the concept of unity and that those

dynamics like real world circumstances and power are not always addressed. Hope IS there, but ONLY if we are thoughtful about it and ONLY if our unity is based on the compassionate care of all.

Beautifully said and I could not agree more with her.

Unity is not uniformity. It is not a call for all us to be the same. For women to lower their voices and sound more like men so they can be heard. For queer relationships to look more like straight cisgender relationships so they are more accepted. For people to change their physical bodies to look a certain way in order to be valued. Unity also does not mean we return to an imaginary time when we were all equal for such a time has yet to take place. But that does not mean that such a time cannot take place.

Which leads me to reflect on Amanda Gorman's prophetic poem from the Inauguration:

And yes we are far from polished far from pristine but that doesn't mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect We are striving to forge our union with purpose To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us but what stands before us We close the divide because we know to put our future first

A vision of unity that is not based on uniformity, that is not striving for perfection, but that is based on our genuine commitment to one another and our promise to put our future first.

And so, with Amanda Gorman's poem in mind, I return to our passage for today. Paul is writing a letter to the Church of Corinth, a church he helped establish a while back. His letter is an attempt to defuse quarrels among different groups that have emerged since he left. He does so and specifically addresses their arguments about sex, food, the Lord's supper and the resurrection --- in hopes to unify all of them.

Referring to the part of the letter we read together today, a professor in NT studies, Arland Hultgren, suggests that -- "In Paul's way of thinking, disengagement is not an end in itself. Rather, being disengaged and set free, a person can engage the world from the perspective of being one who is "in Christ." --

And so, I wonder... can the process of disengaging and re-engaging help us form a more Christ-like "Unity"? A Unity that reflects all of God's magnificent creation? One that is stronger because of our differences? One that is based on love and commitment?

Maybe Paul's call is not to stop engaging. But to disengage so that we can re-engage differently.

Paul writes, *From now on, those with spouses should live as though they had none.* To live as if you did not have a spouse, would be to let go of all the privileges that accompany having a spouse & to let go of all beliefs you may have about what marriage should look like. In the fight for same-sex marriage, our nation did just this - we disengaged from ignorance and hate and re-engaged in 2015 with the belief that same-sex marriage should be legalized nationally. Perhaps we can one day legalize marriage for folks in polyamorous relationships.

When we disengage, we free ourselves from the structures and institutions that restrict us. When we re-engage, we do so with an open heart and mind. A heart and mind that shifts the focus from us individually to a larger community committed to sacralizing differences.

Paul also writes, *Buyers should conduct themselves as though they owned nothing*, what would happen if we all conducted ourselves as if we owned nothing? As if we did not own this earth? As if the earth was not just ours to do what we want with? Perhaps then more of us could disengage from destruction and over consumption...and re-engage with plans to reduce waste and stop climate change.

ONE biblical commentator argues that Paul is reminding us that, “we shouldn’t accept the world’s values and principles when they get in the way of God’s kingdom. The things we buy, we should employ for the good of others instead of holding tightly to them.”

Maybe...Paul is not saying that matters of this world do not matter like I originally suspected but saying that they do – they especially matter when they interfere with our ability to form a Christ-like “Unity.”

You may laugh at what I am about to share next, but I am serious when I say we can see an example of a Christ-like “Unity” in the last season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (we all know Buffy was going to find her way into one of my sermons). At the end of the last season, when all hope is gone – it is Buffy and her friends fighting the source of all evil – not a vampire, not an enormous snakelike demon, not a hell goddess, but the source of evil itself. Buffy discovers, with the help of her friend, Willow, a powerful witch, that she can share her slayer power with all potential slayers across the globe.

You see, the whole show is based on the premise that there can only be one slayer at any given time and only when that slayer dies can the next slayer receive her power.

Buffy questions this rule that was created by a bunch of white men centuries ago. Even more importantly, she realizes that she can change this rule and that the world depends on her doing so. The world depends upon her sharing her power, not hoarding it all for herself. The world depends on a Christ-like “Unity.”

And when she does, when she shares her slayer powers with all potential slayers –they are able to triumph over evil and stop the apocalypse.

I will admit that I do not believe that we can always easily box good and evil into two neat categories, but I do believe in shared power.

My prayer this morning is that we disengage to free ourselves. That we let go of all the voices that tell us we are less than – because of what we look like, because of who we love, because of our abilities – I pray that we also let go of all the voices that tell us some lives in this world are more valuable than others – I pray that we conduct ourselves as if we do not own power – so we don’t hoard it all for ourselves, but rather share it with each other. I pray that we are thoughtful and compassionate.

And I pray that when we re-engage, we do so with the divine love God has for all of us. Amen.



