

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 3/21/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, March 22 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for unity in the Body of Christ. Ask God to heal divisions and to help us find unity in Christ. Pray that the Holy Spirit guide us in placing God's vision ahead of our own.*

I know a man who grew up a Lutheran in a small town in the Midwest. As a teenager, he was told that if he ever found himself on the same street as the Roman Catholic church, he was to cross the street and pass by on the other side. Just like the priest and the Pharisee in the parable of the of the Good Samaritan, he was to get as far from that which was “unclean.” In high school, he dated a Roman Catholic girl, but he admits that he did it as much to upset his parents as he did because he liked her.

This kind of prejudice toward other denominations is not as common as it once was, but it still exists. A few years ago, I served an inner-city congregation where some of the folks in the neighborhood were originally from Mexico. In Mexico, the Roman Catholic church is by far the dominant religious group, and there is very strong bias against Lutherans. Mexican priests will even go so far as to describe Lutheran as the “enemy.” Yet, because this Lutheran church was located and called to serve in this neighborhood, we had to find a way to connect with all our neighbors, including those of Mexican heritage. When asked what the denomination was of our church, I developed the practice of answering that we were reformed Catholic. There were several who, after worshiping with us for some time, came to me to say, “I just realized that when you said ‘reformed Catholic,’ you meant Lutheran. But this church is just like the Catholic church where I grew up, and I like it here.”

Prejudice can occur even within congregations. The first church I served had become divided over the previous pastor. There were those who very much liked the pastor and supported him, while others strongly disliked him. Though the latter group opposed the pastor, they weren't about to leave their church. So, it wasn't long before people were actually sitting on one side of the church or the other based on their loyalty to the pastor. You knew who was on which side of the issue by where they sat to worship.

The first step in bridging division, whether it exists between congregations or within is to focus on those things that we have in common. It is important to set aside differences as much as possible, and instead identify what is mutually important. The greatest of these common values for all of us is our shared faith in Jesus Christ. Whether in communities or congregations, the one thing we can all claim as unifying is our belief in Jesus as Lord. When it comes to divisions in the Christian community the thing that can bring unity us is the great truth that that which unites us is greater than that which divides us.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey