

## "UNITY IN DIVERSITY"

### INTRODUCTION

Back in the month of January, in his State of the Union Address, President Johnson spoke of a certain restlessness in the nation. In the last two months a great deal of that restlessness in the hearts and minds of American people has turned into deep anguish.

We have been looking at the pictures of our mangled boys in Vietnam. We find that we begin to recognize more and more of the names and the faces of the maimed and the dead. We read day after day in the papers the body count of the enemy dead as if war were some entertaining spectator sport. We see on television and in the magazines the destruction of entire villages, major sections of cities, the slaughter of thousands of innocent women and children, the enforced deportation of those who are left to swell the refugee towns of more than two million beings in a nation of eighteen million - and all this by military necessity. And as it becomes bitterly clear that military victory is not in sight for either side, we wonder how long all the killing and carnage will go on. In early February, General Westmoreland told a group of religious leaders, "Gentlemen, we must be prepared to stay in Vietnam for a generation".

### ANGER AND PITY IN OUR ANGUISH

There is more and more anger in our anguish because responsibilities for the Vietnam tragedy have to be assigned, and history is even now assigning those responsibilities. And there is pity in our anguish - pity which demands that we be told and face the truth; pity which cries out for vision, for that capacity to think new thoughts and take new leads and find solutions - that vision without which the people perish; pity which requires men and nations before the bar of history to admit their mistakes.

Today as the debate across the country grows bitter and deep, as in this election year the stakes and the passions rise, as the poet's vision looms imminent of fulfillment over our country: ".....things fall apart, the center cannot hold". It is time to affirm that we have more in common than in conflict, that what unites us is stronger than what divides us; that true patriots and lovers of their country may, and do, hold widely divergent views regarding our country's Vietnam policy; and that in the face of such divergence our country's honor and health are not served by mutual recrimination but mutual reconciliation.

It is time to affirm with St. Paul that it is God's purpose in the world to unite all men and nations to himself and to one another, and that the church is called to be the living sign and demonstration of that unity, for the church is by very definition that community where men who embrace divergent views can still embrace each other. Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, spells out those qualities required of those who would live in such unity:

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace"

These are qualities the church and our nation will badly need in the days ahead. Suppose we consider several of those qualities here this hour. Lowliness - patience - forbearance - love - in order to maintain the unity of the spirit in peace.

### LOWLINESS

Lowliness is the opposite of arrogance or self-righteousness. Lowliness means that one does not consider himself morally superior to another person even, and especially, when that person holds views on a given issue contrary to one's own, and one passionately believes his view to be correct.

All of us, at times, have trouble in following Paul's advice at this point. I have trouble in being lowly, as a close friend and former member of this church now living elsewhere told me. Several weeks ago he telephoned me long distance and we talked for about forty minutes about the political situation in this land and especially about the War in Vietnam. We had different views and things were quite heated. A few days later he wrote me a letter (and I suspect with a twinkle in his eye) said, "I hope you will allow me and others the privilege of disagreeing with your position on Vietnam without regarding me as a morally inferior person" A couple of days later I wrote back to him, "Friend - I don't think you're morally inferior, I just think you're wrong".

As Christians we have a right to regard one another as wrong on a given issue, but not as morally inferior. If there is one thing we're sure of as Christians, it is that each of us is a sinner, and a sinner is one whose vision of the truth is impaired. Indeed, we realize that our corporate grasp of the truth will often be more trustworthy than our individual assessments, though not always. The prophets of every age - religious and political - remind us that today's heretic may become tomorrow's hero. So it has been for such men as Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Thoreau, Bonhoeffer and other men who were for a time without honor in their own country.

MEEKNESS Meekness is the opposite of self-assertion. Meekness is making oneself vulnerable to the pain and hostility of another. To be meek is to have the inner confidence, the spiritual strength required to turn the other cheek. Turning the other cheek is an adult ethic; it is not for children nor for the emotionally wounded nor for the oppressed. Meekness is the capacity to sustain personal attack without reprisal, the capacity to be angry at the right time, but not the wrong time. Jesus is the model of the meek man - the gentle man. He did not strike back when he himself was personally attacked. When other human beings were being exploited or de-humanized, He spoke out and talked back with passion in their defense. Meekness, Paul would have us see, is submission to the truth - it is a man's will surrendered to the will of God.

PATIENCE Patience means to suffer long. It is the will and capacity to endure a situation or a person without giving up hope, without losing your cool, without cracking.

You remember King Lear, in outraged anguish at the cruelty of his daughters, cries out in his fleeting moments of reason, "Oh heavens, give me patience, patience I need". Patience is the stuff of sanity. It allows men to reason together under pressure. Patience has the capacity to yield, but not too much. Patience has staying power. Hemingway might have been describing the stamina of patience when he wrote:

"Man can be defeated but not destroyed. Man can be destroyed, but not defeated"

Patience is suffering hope.

FORBEARANCE To forbear another means to bear him in all his irritating idiosyncracies and even his betrayals without retaliation. Forbearance is the refusal to retaliate and the will to forgive seventy times seven. It is the courage to risk being a damned fool in order not to close the door on being a fool for Christ's sake. The forbearing man would rather run the risk of being conned than cruel. Forbearance is to give another the benefit of the doubt; it is to make allowances. Mutual forbearance is what holds a marriage or a friendship or a congregation or a nation or a world together when the lines become tight and tense. When the lines break, it's forbearance which releases the bitterness and enables the future to be born.

IN LOVE Love is the nucleus of loyalty - that loyalty which gives a man the strength to lay down his reputation, his strategic advantages, his material wealth, his future security, and even his life for a friend, or even, as in the case of Jesus and a few other men, for his enemy. There is nothing weak or sentimental about such love. It is strong as the cross is strong. It is hard as death is hard. It is "for better or for worse". It is without conditions or reservations. It is that gracious power to wish nothing but good for him who has betrayed you and even destroyed those who are dear to you. It is that power which enables God to continue to love men who destroy their brothers who are the dear children of God. It is steady good will toward those who threaten you or persecute you. It is a matter of will - not of feeling. Love is what holds the center together and keeps things from falling apart.

It is love which maintains the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace. It expresses itself as desire to serve the unity we have, to keep it from being broken, and when it is broken, it provides the zeal to repair it and restore it.

It is the judgment of many that our nation is more severely divided today than at any time in modern history, so it should not surprise anyone that more and more sermons will be touching on the heated controversy that is resulting from differences people hold on vital issues. Tom Wicker, writing in Thursday's editorial page of the New York Times offered this observation:

"The inescapable fact is that regardless of the rights and wrongs of his Southeast Asian policy - call it a war policy or a peace policy or a middle-road policy - Lyndon Johnson has lead this country into the worst moral and political disunity that virtually any living man can remember; the pre-World War II divisions between isolationists and interventionists, the economic battles of the Great Depression, the malaise of the Joe McCarthy era - none of these came as close to tearing apart the political and social fabric of this nation as has the war in Vietnam".

To be sure, controversy is painful, but if rightly accepted it can be fruitful. Because we know that our unity does not depend on any timid consensus on war or any other issue, but is eternally and unshakably ground in God - the father of all men - black white, yellow, and that our unity is rooted in values that reverence human life - all life - we can bear controversy. We can embrace the partisans of the right and left, allowing them to be partisan, holding within our fellowship the antagonisms of the world, until by God's grace they are transformed into creative polarities. Our differences need not tear us apart, but can enrich us, humble us, ennoble us, and lead us to a deeper unity than we have yet known.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY For, says Paul, "Our unity is a unity in diversity. Grace was given to each of us according to Christ's gifts"

Paul reminds us that some are called to be apostles, some prophets, some teachers, some miracle workers, some healers, some helpers, some administrators. There is a variety of gifts, functions, insights - but the same spirit. We neither want nor expect a bland uniformity but a salty diversity - trustee and teacher, custodian and committee chairman, picketer and pray-er, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, prodigal and puritan - each serves his own indispensable role in the church where no distinctions as to worth are made, only to function. Our unity is never uniformity, but always unity in diversity. So we welcome diversity of background and insight, knowing that the broader our diversity, the deeper will be our apprehension of the truth, until as Paul puts it:

"We all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God - to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"

CONCLUSION

Here then is the heart of our unity in diversity. It is by speaking the truth in love to each other that we grow up into the maturity of which he speaks. ~~Each of us may and should~~ share his own vision of the truth - not yielding the truth easily for the sake of some false consensus, - but offering ~~his own truth in love so that~~ the community may not be torn down but built up. Both truth and love are essential. Truth without love is cold fact which destroys our affection for one another; love without truth is warm fantasy which destroys our respect for one another.

Have we not learned, many of us, again and again in our life together, that when we do acknowledge a disagreement - man to man → and take each other seriously, we are moved from perhaps a merely casual relationship down to a deeper level not only of understanding, but of friendship. How marvelous that God in his wisdom should lead us through our diversity into his unity.

And so, as we look to the weeks and months ahead in this critical year when the elctions are at stake and the passions rise - let us speak the truth in love to one another, fully assured by God himself that we have more in common than in conflict, and that we are those who can embrace divergent views while yet embracing each other.

LET US PRAY

Give us, O God, the spirit which will enable us to hold passionate convictions and yet exercise dispassionate judgments. Give us more tolerance and less temper. Help us to see both side of a question, and as we face the complicated issues of our day, fill us with that spirit which will enable us to stand for the right and the truth, without bitterness and without any loss of loving-kindness. In the spirit of Christ, we pray.