A Sermon preached in Christ Church, Grosse Pointe, Michigan
by The Reverend Andrew Van Culin, Rector

The Sunday of the Annual Meeting
24 January 2016

O Lord God, the light of the minds that know you,
the Life of the souls that love you,
and the strength of the hearts that serve you:
Help us, so to know you that we may truly love you,
and so to love you that we may fully serve you,
whom to serve is perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

It’s among the least known periods in the life of the church catholic– the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – yet here it is. Anchored between the Confession of Saint Peter on January 18 and the Conversion of Saint Paul which we observe tomorrow, this annual eight-day cycle of prayer reminds us of many difficult and wonderful truths of our community and world.

Most obviously, our need to pray for the unity of the Christian community reminds us of the sad and disheartening reality that division continues among us. Those who followed the news as it emerged from the recent gathering of Anglican Primates were reminded again of the ongoing division within the Anglican Communion itself. But this is nothing new, either to the Anglican Communion or the Church Catholic. The Lambeth Conference itself, a great sign of our Anglican unity – one of our communion’s three “Instruments of Unity,” in fact – was originally born out the great nineteenth century divide created by the teaching and practice of the Bishop of Natal.

Of course, it will take no time at all to fill a page of all those things about which faithful people have disagreed through the ages: the ordination of women, the purpose of marriage and human sexuality, just war, abolition and slavery, high church and low church, authority in the church, Holy Baptism and the real presence of Christ, the communion of saints and the Holy Mother of our Lord, the primacy of Rome (both sacred and secular), divorce, the proper language of the Bible, the community of discernment, the purpose and form of music in worship, the place of the lapsed following the establishment of the Church, the definition of biblical canon, the doctrine of the Holy
Spirit and the Trinity, ethnic and economic division, food sacrificed to idols, the Sabbath, and circumcision. Are you still with me?

The same story can be said of our community here at Christ Church. Even in my short now three years, I am keenly aware of the current and historic divide among us. We, a people of great and good faith, have struggled and disagreed with one another over all sorts of matters. I could simply re-read the list above – but there are divisions and disagreements amongst us that are particular to our local experience: the priority of mission and, therefore, the appropriate allocation of our annual budget for music, the care of our facilities and grounds, the acquisition and security of fine things, our ministry to our children and youth, increased outreach and service, commitments to the wider church and diocese; beyond the allocation and control of funds, we also have meaningful division on the ordination of homosexual women and men; the purpose and form of worship, incense and singing of the Mass; the oversight of ministry and the role and relationship of the Rector and the Vestry, the purpose and use of our Endowment and the use of non-endowment assets, the importance of pew cushions and the furnishing of our space.

Certainly, our history of disagreement and even outright schism is wearying and disheartening. And yet, one of the most comforting realities of the early Church may be the simple fact of division and disagreement. The stories of the first apostles, of whom Saint Peter and Saint Paul stand at the head, remind us that division, tiring as it is, is and always has been a reality of the Christian community, both universal and local, as it is in all communities.

We may compare our current state to that of young, new parents, who in a moment of exhaustion, anger, and desperation hesitatingly reach out to a friend who has a bit of parenting experience to share all their anxiety and struggle as a new father or mother, only to find that such angst and struggle is normal! We all know the comfort we find when we see someone whom we have idolized in some way – the perfect mom or dad or husband or wife or boss . . . or, you fill in the blank. We know that feeling of comfort when the person who seems to have it all together trips up, even just a little. “They’re human,” we say aloud, and quietly in the silence of our hearts we say, “Thank God, I’m not the only one who does that!”

And so, we might take a bit of comfort – I do, at least – in knowing that disagreement, division even, is nothing new to the Christian community, this one here in Grosse Pointe, or any throughout time. I have long since forgotten which of the great eighteenth century Anglican divines said it, but “there are [always] matters about which faithful people will disagree.”
The great tragedy of our faith is not the fact of our disagreement, but that we allow our disagreements to truly divide us, such that we firmly believe the other with whom we disagree possesses some form of diminished or incomplete faith.

Fortunately, this quiet week of prayer reminds us also of a great truth of our faith – unity, in fact, is who we are. Unfortunate as our human divisions may be, we are bolstered by the great truth of a unity that precedes us; a unity, in fact, that supersedes us. We are reminded that the foundational unity of the Christian community is not, in fact, a result of our affinity for one another nor even of our common affection, but rather springs forth from our common experience of God’s love and mercy first toward us personally and collectively. We are one, because God draws us together as daughters and sons, and together we cry out, “Abba, Father.” We are one, because God first loves us.

Naturally, the reality of our unity is best revealed when we choose to love one another, not simply because we agree with each another, but most profoundly when we disagree. And so we are challenged as a Christian community not only to love our sisters and brothers and dear friends, but also those with whom we disagree, those whom we do not know, and even the one we call enemy. We are called to love another not because of ourselves, but because of God so loves us.

It is, in fact, when we come together in the true light of our brokenness and sin and hurt, that our love for one another and our complete unity in Christ become clear. You see, God does not merely love a part of you or me. God does not simply love that good part of us, that part that lives with piety and faith, that part that we so gladly share at cocktail parties and church. God loves the whole of you and me, that grungy, disheveled, and disordered part as well – which means that God receives us even in our brokenness and sin.

Only in our brokenness is our true love revealed. This is one of the great realities of life-long marriage and union. When we come together with one another in the vitality and beauty of our youth, when we know all the good of our partner and only a hint of his or her imperfection, it seems easy to proclaim our love. But as we age, as our beauty and bodies change, as our energy flags, and as our imperfections comes more clearly to light, it would seem that our love for one another would diminish. And yet, mysteriously our love more often grows – because, only when we are fully known, can we be fully loved.
Such is the love of God.

So, what does all of this mean for us in practicality – either individually in our homes or as a part of this wonderful community of faith?

For one, I believe it means that we will always be challenged by and presented with division and disagreement, for such is human relationship and the history of the Christian community. So we ought not be dismayed.

It means, too, that we must receive one another, particularly when we disagree or are threatened with division. It means in the face of sin and error we forgive, and in the face of disagreement we explore. Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, put it right when we wrote, “It is never right to rest content with disproving another man’s (sic) view. You must always go on to ask why he held it. You must say, ‘He is sure to have got hold of something important.”

It means, also, that we must value one another with such care and affection that we always treat one another with respect, honesty, and kindness. It begins always with simple common courtesy, “hello” is essential. It means as well, that we speak with honesty directly to one another – not indirectly through others or in hiding behind one another’s back. Rather, we must have the courage, confidence, and respect to related openly and directly with kindness to one another – never through gossip and back-biting. If we have a problem with another, Scripture is quiet clear – we go to that person – no one else! Only if we cannot find resolution do we involve another. It is essential, especially in times of disagreement that we are intentional about our care and treatment for one another, ensuring that we are respectful, honest, and kind.

Of course, it is easier to love the one whom we know, those with whom we agree, and those whom we find beautiful in any number of ways. But that is not the end of Christian love. Thankfully, God’s love is more than that! God’s love is for you, all of you! God’s love is for me, all of me! God’s love embraces all that is good and beautiful within us, and receives and redeems all that is broken by sin and hurt within.

And it is that love that makes us one.