

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well we just completed, if you didn't know, the week of prayer for Christian unity. It is a call to see ourselves, no matter who we are or what our background church or denominational affiliation, as one in Christ. And in our letter to the church in Corinth today, we read Saint Paul's invitation to unity.

And he writes, "Just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were made to drink of one Spirit."

And he goes on to describe this body of Christ very metaphorically, actually describing the various parts of the human body. The hands, the eyes, the feet, the ears, reminding everyone that even though we're all different, we all have very different callings, different gifts, we come from very different places, we are still one. In other words, he's inviting us to see our unity within our diversity. And it's easy, I think, to just chalk this sort of talk up to some theological niceties, to see it as a theoretical ideal but without real practical application. But is it?

And I have to admit, I thought this way, especially when I found the Episcopal Church as a young adult. I absolutely fell in love with it and it was a clear departure for me from my former tradition. I fell in love with the prayer book, with our tradition, with our liturgy and sacraments, our music, even the history of our church gripped me. And I have admittedly often wondered why all of Christendom isn't Episcopalian. I mean, it seems like we have all the good stuff.

And I'm happy to share it. I'm happy to share it with others and raise your hand if you've ever thought the Episcopal Church is the best kept secret. It doesn't have to be a secret, by the way, you can tell people about us. Invite them. But, right? I am a proud Episcopalian. And if you are too, you know we actually have mugs and t-shirts and key chains, "Proud Episcopalian" emblazoned on them. I found those this week.

And then I remember the very first Episcopal parish that I served, it was in Columbus, Ohio. And I was so excited to be in the Episcopal Church. And one of my predecessors had in our newcomer literature, "The Top

10 Reasons To Be Episcopalian," attributed to Robin Williams, going back to 2002. Some of you may know this one, but it just, again, it just made me love the Episcopal Church all the more.

He lists the top 10 reasons as this, if you don't know it:

10. No snake handling.
 9. You can believe in dinosaurs.
 8. Male and female, God created them. Male and Female, we ordain them.
 7. You don't have to check your brains at the door.
 6. Pew aerobics.
 5. Church year is color coded.
 4. Free wine on Sunday.
 3. All of the pageantry, none of the guilt.
 2. You don't have to know how to swim to get baptized.
- And the number one reason to be Episcopalian, no matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you.

So, yes, I have celebrated the fact, I still celebrate the fact that I think the Episcopal Church is pretty fantastic. And yet, I have to say, I've become increasingly aware over the years as to this issue of unity and seeing myself as more than just Episcopalian. This sense of unity is so important in today's day and age. At a time and a place when we as a nation, as a people are so extremely divided.

And today at the forum, we delved again into the topic of civil discourse. And to those who have challenged this, who wonder why that's a relevant topic for the church, I've made the case, I'll make it again. It's because I believe the church has a social responsibility and even I would say a divine calling to model unity within diversity. If we can't show the world what unity in diversity looks like, then who can? We, who claim and say and celebrate that we are one in Christ, but as you probably have noticed, the church often fails to reflect the unity of Christ we profess. We can fail that within our own churches, individually, and certainly within the wider sense of church worldwide. Holding up litmus tests to others as being in or out of the fold based on things actually at odds with the biblical witness.

When I was the rector of Saint Alban's in 2009, I was approached by an Iraqi Methodist Church, who was local and was seeking to worship, to find some kind of meeting space for their body, their large and growing body of Methodist Christians from Iraq. And as I spoke with the young pastor who was assisting them in this

endeavor, I learned that they had already approached, he thought, every church in the city of El Cajon. And that we were among the last they'd talked to.

And so far, he told me, they'd been turned down by every church. Even the big Methodist church in town said they had no room to host them. And so I asked the pastor why he thought this was. And he seemed a little hesitant. He said, "Yes, a lack of space, but," he said, "really, I was told time and time again that because they were from Iraq, people in the church were very uncomfortable with them being there in their church."

So I was a little confused. I said, "Well, but these are Christians, right? These are brothers and sisters in Christ and many of them are actually driven out and persecuted specifically because of their Christian faith." He said, "Yes." And I said, "And aren't they also viewed as American sympathizers in Iraq? That's one of the reasons they had to leave?" "Yes," he said. But nevertheless, he told me no one seems to want a group of Iraqi's regularly meeting in their church space.

So I brought the issue of hosting the Iraqi Methodists to the vestry and presented the issues. And the vestry decided that not only did we have the space for them, but they said we had a calling to open our doors to these Christian brothers and sisters in our city and to stand in unity with them.

And I was so touched by what was clearly a brave act of Christian discipleship by the vestry to tangibly show love to these, our neighbors, despite our great differences. To finally have a church, St. Alban's be willing to say yes to the Iraqi Christians, to say yes, brothers and sisters, we are one. We are one in Christ no matter your denomination, no matter where you came from. And I'll just never forget the way that pastor received the news and thanked us. I'm just sad it took so much rejection to get to the point of acceptance for them.

So, my friends, I think living out a call to be an act as one in Christ, even and when or especially when we differ or disagree, is essential to who we are as people of God. And I think it extends beyond the church to others. But we have this rare privilege to show our culture what it looks like to talk and act and live in a way that demonstrates the love of God for all people. Even when it seems like everybody else has abandoned that strategy, has dug into their trenches, is refusing to

work in a unified way for our common good. Common good.

I realize it can be hard, it can be hard to seek unity in diversity. But with God's help, this clear call from scripture, I think we can do it. I think we have it in us. And I think that in part because in just a few minutes, we're going to do something we do every Sunday. That special honor of demonstrating our unity as one body when we come to receive the bread and the wine, the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament of holy communion.

Communion, it comes from the Latin roots "com," it means with or together. Union. Unity and oneness. In communion, we are demonstrating the fact that we come together, all of us together as one, in unity with all of our differences, with all of our different beliefs and practices and backgrounds. No matter where we're from, we witness to the fact that we are one at the altar. It is God's invitation. One bread, one cup, one baptism, one Spirit. One.

And you and I have the amazing opportunity to witness to that unity, that radical unity in diversity, to show others what it looks like in our fractured and broken world. To be the change we so need.

Amen.