

## “First, we need to forgive”

A sermon by Reverend Alice Marcrum  
Prayer Service for Christian Unity, 2006

We have gathered here together this evening to pray for unity in the Body of Christ. The words of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ from the gospel of Matthew, “**where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them**” offers us hope. Hope for the healing of the Body of Christ that has been splintered and divided over the ages and continues to do so even today. It seems that try as we may we cannot seem to stop the continuous disagreements that lead to only more divisions within the Body of Christ.

I come to you this evening as a representative of the Episcopal Church that is currently in great turmoil over decisions made by our leaders several years ago. Many parishes and members have already left the Episcopal Church with the hope of finding peace elsewhere. The word ‘reconciliation’ within the Episcopal Church seems to be only a fleeting dream with not much hope for healing.

I stand before you as one who is watching the rendering asunder of a member of the Body of Christ whom I have come to love dearly. It is a time of uncertainty and fear for many within the Episcopal Church as we see members leaving and parishes closing. It is believed by many that only the power of prayer and a miracle from God Almighty can save the Episcopal Church from schism and self-destruction.

I find it ironic that the one member of the ecumenical ministerial association whose denomination is being torn asunder was asked to give a sermon on Christian Unity. Yet, maybe it is appropriate for me to be doing this tonight, because I can share with you the pain that comes when reconciliation within the Body of Christ fails. For many here tonight, the pain of breaking away from other members of the Body of Christ has become an historical part of your denomination’s story. No longer is the pain so close to home, instead the wounds of division have been covered over and dulled with time as it has become a part of your denomination’s story.

Yet, I believe that the main reason we as the Body of Christ continue to struggle with one another both within our own respective camps and with each other is because there is a bitter root of unforgiveness within Christ’s Body. This root of unforgiveness goes back to the very first group that left the mainstream church and set out on their own, instead of trying to work through their differences with one another. This root of unforgiveness goes back to the first Christians who were killed by other Christians as heretics for their beliefs instead of being reconciled with the Church. The corporate Body of Christ’s hands are still blood

stained from the martyrs of long ago to the present day who have dared to speak up against the sins of the Church.

This is not something that we can ignore any longer. We need to repent of not only our sins of prejudice towards one another's views, but also the sins of our forefathers and foremothers of schism and division from a long time ago. Christ did not pray for us to be divided into many pieces, instead He prayed that we would be united together as one just like He and the Father are One.

Many Christians believe that Christ was crucified only once, but I am here to tell you that the Body of Christ is crucified again and again every time we the members of the Church refuse to reconcile with one another. When we persecute and speak evil of one another, we are driving the nails afresh into the Body of Christ which is the Church of God. By our own actions of dissension and unforgiveness we make a mockery to the world of Christ being King of Kings while our own sins towards one another place afresh the crown of thorns upon our Beloved's brow. Instead of being a submissive and loving bride for the King of Kings we the Church have been a selfish spoiled bride that has insisted on her own way. Our bridal gown is not spotless, but is stained with the sins of strife and arrogance.

If we truly want to be the Bride of Christ and the Body of Christ that Jesus hopes and prays for us to be than we need to get serious about becoming what we were called to be. I am not talking about more programs. I am talking about a change of heart. First, we need to forgive. We need to forgive our ancestors who first failed at reconciliation in the Body of Christ and allowed the divisions and schisms to begin in the first place. Secondly, we need to forgive one another for the pain that this virus of schism has caused both in the past and in the present in the Body of Christ. Then we need to ask the Lord to forgive us for our own inadequacies in being true reconcilers for Christ.

This seems like an ominous task and perhaps one that is unattainable. After all, we each believe within our hearts that we know the truth about the scriptures and the way in which the Church should go. But I tell you from one who is looking from a painfully close view of the failure of reconciliation among the brothers and sisters of Christ, we as a Church Body no longer have the luxury of going our own ways with no regard as to who is hurt. Each time a group of members of Christ's Body are splintered, Christ's witness in the world is hurt.

We are supposed to be examples of Christ's love. Yet, how can we do that when we are continually fighting with one another and shunning one another. We cannot even sit at the Lord's Table together. We may think that we are reconciled, but I ask you, 'How many families share their main family meal at different tables?' Even within the Anglican Communion of which the Episcopal Church is a member, there are clergy who refuse to share the Lord's Table with

one another. This is seen as a sign of irreconcilable differences. A term used often in divorce proceedings.

Today, we have the technology and the financial means to win the world for Christ, if we would only unite and go forward together with the Good News of Christ's love for all humanity. Unfortunately, we will probably not see this happening until the Body of Christ experiences a change of heart. The old root of unforgiveness must first be destroyed and its poisonous vine torn down to allow for growth of godly forgiveness. A godly forgiveness seeks not to bring up old wounds, but looks only to love and learn from one another.

A current example of such forgiveness and love can be seen in the true story about the son of a missionary who not only forgave the tribesman who killed his father, but became close friends with him when the wives of the murdered missionaries brought their children and moved into the Waodoni village. Many of you are probably familiar with this story that is now a motion picture entitled 'End of the Spear'. It is an amazing story of what happens when people are willing to set aside the past through godly forgiveness and move forward in love.

In an interview with Nell Minow, Steve Saint not only shares the story of his unusual friendship with the man who killed his father, but also about the Waodani tribe that accepted him as one of their own. For the Waodani people there was no right or wrong in their culture that was filled with violence. In his interview, Steve states, "In the Waodani language, there is no word for forgiveness. That was a new concept: I forgive you. The way they describe it now is. If someone does something you don't see well, then you forget it and let that go. If someone doesn't do something you do see well, you let that go."

The courageous act of open forgiveness by Steve, his mother and the other missionaries' wives and children toward those who had killed their loved ones completely changed the violent ways of the Waodoni tribe. A people who had never experienced the concept of forgiveness and had known only violence, became a peaceful community when they were shown love and not hatred or retaliation by those they had hurt so cruelly. Even their own language was changed to accept new concepts of forgiveness and love for others.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if God could change the hearts of the Waodoni people through the forgiveness of the martyred missionaries' wives and their children, just think what changes God could do in the Body of Christ. If we would but follow the example of these courageous ones, who refused to allow the root of unforgiveness to take hold in their lives, then we too can be used by God to change those around us.

The Body of Christ does not have to remain in dissension and strife. There is still hope for the Church to become the spotless Bride who is not self-centered, but generous and loving towards all. We can help to bring this change about

beginning this evening. All we have to do is reach out and forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us. No longer can we allow the root of unforgiveness to hold us back from becoming the People of God that Christ has prayed for us to be. Tonight, this very evening we can allow the Lord to change our hearts and fill us with His love for one another. We need only to remember Jesus' promise to us, ***“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”***

Standing here tonight and preaching this sermon, I cannot leave the pulpit without, as a representative of the Episcopal Church of the USA, first asking each of you, as representatives from your respective denominations, to forgive us, to forgive me, for the hatefulness, strife and hurt that we have caused to you and your faithful flocks. For give me, and all Episcopalians, please.