

Sermon: Week for the Prayer of Christian Unity
by Rt. Rev. Bishop Munib A. Younan
The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
Jerusalem

Email: administration@elcjh.org

Jan. 25, 2011

“One. . . in the apostles’ teaching. . . .”
(Acts 2:42)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Dear sister and brothers in Christ,

We are happy that we Palestinian Christians were asked by the World Council of Churches and the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity to prepare this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity to come out from Jerusalem, from the local Christian Churches. We as a committee thought it appropriate to focus on the life of the apostles in the early church: “and they continued in the apostles’ teaching, in the breaking of bread, in fellowship, and in prayer.” (Acts 2:42)

What started on that day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, was a spirit of unity and ecumenism.

As I often say, to work for unity in Jerusalem is an art. We are in need of capable artists to produce something so beautiful. We all know the work required and the careful planning to design a Middle Eastern Carpet. It is as if each of our churches is a different color of thread (or yarn), yet woven together the carpet becomes so much more beautiful than each strand of yarn by itself. The individual threads do not lose their identity or individual character. The beauty of their particular color remains intact. Yet coming together under the direction of an artist, the finished carpet is more beautiful than all of the individual strands. And it is none other than the Holy Spirit that guides this process of coming together to produce this beautiful ecumenical carpet. Picture with me such a beautiful carpet hanging here on the wall—a beautiful carpet, perhaps with an image of the Lord’s Supper with Jesus sitting in the middle—Imagine how beautiful this carpet would be.

If ecumenism succeeds in Jerusalem, it can succeed in the whole world. And so we are called to this purpose, for we are capable artists weaving together this beautiful carpet of the holy communion. It is not a burden, nor an effort. It is simply our duty to which we have been called to answer Christ's priestly intercession so that we may be one as Christ and the Father are one (John 17).

When making a carpet, sometimes we make a mistake, then we have to stop and make a correction before we can go on. And so it is in the church.

This past July in Stuttgart, Germany, the Lutheran World Federation came together in its 11th Assembly. After studying all the documents and all the historical facts about what happened among Lutherans and Mennonites, the Anabaptists of the Middle Ages, we made a historic decision. Although we may disagree on some theological issues, we as Lutherans felt it necessary to publicly repent for acts of persecution that we were responsible for in Europe that forced the Mennonites to emigrate to the United States and other lands. We assumed our responsibility to repent of the fact that we had failed to see in the other, our own brothers and sisters in Christ. No, we had not come to agree on every point of doctrine. Yet we had failed to recognize that we were children of the same heavenly father. It had been a mistake, yet more than a mistake, it had been a sin against God, who surely must have felt sorrow over his divided children. And so we as the Lutheran communion publicly repented. Yes, with tears in the eyes of Lutherans and Mennonites we sought reconciliation and pledged to live in the spirit of repentance and forgiveness with each other.

This can be an example of how Christian unity can take place here in Jerusalem. Ecumenism is not built on the shoulders of others, not on finding mistakes and disagreements with others. Nor is it in concentrating on particular events in our common histories. Unity starts when we are open to live in a spirit of repentance and forgiveness, and ask our Lord to guide us. Unity is not uniformity. A carpet of all red threads is okay, or one that is all blue, or all green. But we all know that much more desirable in the market is that carpet which brings together various colors into one with a carefully designed pattern of the Holy Communion.

Each of the churches brings to our ecumenical carpet special gifts that benefit us all. Those of us from the Lutheran tradition stand in appreciation of the witness that each of you give:

- To the Orthodox we say thank you for your witness of steadfastness in faith.
- To the Armenian and Coptic for your example of faith in martyrdom.
- To the Syriac for the way that you have preserved a history going back to the Aramaic roots of our faith.
- To the Latin Catholic for your example of church order and for the spirit of faithful obedience.
- To the Maronites for your ability to contextualize our faith.
- To the Greek Catholic for joining East and West together under one roof.
- To the Anglicans for your liturgical forms and hymnody
- And I hope that you would say the same for our Lutheran zeal and fervor in preaching and especially our devotion to justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers.

We stand appreciative of each of you and your witness in the faith. And now that we have worked together for some time here in Jerusalem, we can only say that we cannot imagine for one moment trying to exist without each other.

Unity in a spirit of repentance and forgiveness calls us as reconciled diversity to see Christ in the other, and to find a common witness here in Jerusalem. Why did God decide on that first Pentecost to make use of 19 different languages including Arabic? Why has God today placed us here in Jerusalem: Orthodox, Catholic, Oriental Catholic and Orthodox, Lutheran Evangelical, Anglican? Why here in Jerusalem? Why us? Why these particular different churches? One thing is certain: he called us to be in Jerusalem to be a light to the world. It is a light that emanates from Golgotha and the empty tomb. It is a light reflecting this spirit of repentance and forgiveness. It is a light that calls us to be living witness and creative diakonia together.

The focus of this, the third day of this special week, is in the apostles' teaching. Think back to those early days of the church. I would have liked to sit at the Apostles' feet. I would have liked to hear those very words coming from the mouth of Peter and Andrew, James and John, Matthew and Thomas, and all the rest, yes, and the words of young Mark and the words of Luke who followed them. What did they teach? How did they attract their people to thirst and hunger for the Word of God? How did they read and interpret the Old Testament in a way that touched the peoples' hearts? Imagine! In just one single didactic sermon of Simon Peter, three thousand people came to believe.

The role of the church today is one that must continue the apostles' teaching if it is to continue to exist. And not just the traditions, but the teaching of the apostles. The teaching of the apostles is the design of our carpet, the plan which brings all the individual threads together as a piece of art.

Teaching is a transformative power that can change the world. Read the history of my own church, for example, about our forefathers and foremothers at Schneller and Talitha Kumi schools. They did not want to establish a church, but rather the transformative power of the education of society. It was none other than the same spirit of Paul when he said, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation." The experience of my church is the same as other churches' teaching. It is the Apostolic Vocation.

Today we are all challenged why Palestinian Christians are emigrating from the Holy Land. It is a cause of real concern: today Christians are less than 2% of the total population. Surveys and research analysis say there are many reasons: the unsettled political situation, the absence of a horizon for peace, a lack of jobs, a lack of housing, the growth of extremism, political and religious, on both sides. Christians are emigrating. And what is our role as Christian Churches in Jerusalem? What is our role as teachers of the church?

To put it simply, it is this: To rise up together to the challenges that we are facing here in Jerusalem. Maybe we are affected by what is happening in Iraq and in Egypt. Maybe we are concerned by questions raised in the Vatican Synod on the Middle East. However, since that first Pentecost Christians have always resided in Jerusalem and have always presented a living and dynamic witness. We continue to encourage one another to be that witness as we are the fabric of society. Last month when I met with His Holiness, Pope Benedict, in Rome, we agreed that we must have a concerted effort, a common strategy, a greater voice, and a common witness. Our unity is our strength. Unity, not to be used against one another, but unity for the benefit of the others, to be a light to the world.

We must have strategies and action plans. Most of all we are called to remain steadfast in the apostles' teaching. We all as churches are responsible to deepen the understanding of our witness and presence in the Holy Land. We are called to educate our people:

To know the Bible deeply.

To understand its message.

To emphasize the importance of Christian education.

To know why we are here in Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

To show the world that we in Jerusalem continue to be both the church of Golgotha and the church of the empty tomb, the church of suffering, but also the church of resurrection.

We are called to educate our people that what unites us is Jesus.

We are called through this teaching to confess together that

There is one body and one spirit, one hope in which we are called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one eucharist, one God and father of us all.

We are called through this teaching to stand together, to present a common living witness.

Education is so important and so essential that it continues to transform the whole person and to make them capable of facing the emerging challenges ahead of us.

Today a whole host of writers—Muslim and Jewish authors, Arab and Israeli columnists—are saying that Christians are the balancing power in the Middle East. We Christians are called to be a source of moderation. We Christians are called to be instruments of peace, mediators of reconciliation, brokers of love. Only through our educational institutions can we transform society. We are here for a purpose. The turn injustice into justice; hatred into friendship, extremism into moderation, oppression into opportunities of equality and human rights, and to promote the role of women in society. This is Christ's will for all the churches.

We are called to bring transformation. Reconciliation, and empowerment. And we can only do this when we live together in a spirit of repentance and forgiveness. We can only do this when we celebrate the gifts of each other. We can only do this when we are one. One in the apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, in fellowship, and in prayer.

All eyes are on Jerusalem. People are looking to us for answers, for guidance, for leadership. I hope that none will look at us and see disagreements or divisions. Rather people will look at us and see our common witness. People will look at us and say, "See how much they love each other!"

Brothers and sisters in Christ, are we ready? All eyes are upon us. The whole world is watching? What will they say about us? How will they tell the story of our common witness? I pray that they will say, "What a beautiful Middle Eastern carpet they make, what beautiful colors, what beautiful threads, what beautiful design. Look how much they love each other."

Amen.