

United Across War Fields?

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Here I am in the United States of America, participating in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. I was chosen to participate because I am a Lutheran, thus representing another confession; and I am a Palestinian Arab, thus representing another cultural context; and I am a Christian. I have to confess that I didn't feel a great need to pray for unity between Lutherans and Presbyterians. I didn't feel a separation between the two for which to pray for unity. And at the Presbyterian Center here in Louisville, I feel at home as a Lutheran and I feel welcomed, embraced, and united as a Palestinian.

Yet, I have felt another desire to pray since being in the United States for two weeks. Something other than the confessional differences has been bothering me—challenging me to struggle with the whole issue, nature, and essence of Christian unity in the context of conflict and war.

Let me share three scenes with you.

The First Scene: A dialogue is happening between two American Christians. They are two Christians in the United States, yet they are divided between one who is in favor of war and one who opposes war vehemently. The divide is not only between a Democrat and a Republican. It is deeper than that. It is a division between two individuals who are Christians—each claiming Christ. I ask myself, where is the unity? Is unity possible in such a context, or is it a gap between the faithful and the unfaithful?

The Second Scene: A friend of mine, who is a great supporter of our ministry in Bethlehem, is a strong Republican and a supporter of a war against Iraq. I strongly oppose a war. I believe that it is idolatry. It is deception by the ruling powers of this world. The question I ask myself—can we still be friends, or am I compromising the gospel? We remain good friends; we talk about everything—even about President Bush. We remain united. But is this a false unity of two Christians?

The Third Scene: During the first Sunday worship service we attended here in Louisville, the pastor prayed for three members of this Lutheran congregation who were called to go to war. I felt the tension in the sanctuary—the fears and hopes of all of the relatives of the three members. I felt compassion for them. Yet, I ask myself if it is possible to pray for those who go to war. Here, Christians will pray for those in the armed services who are doing their duty; in the Presbyterian Church in Iraq, worshippers will pray for their members who are also called to do their duty. Is this possible? Aren't we as Christians called to refuse to go into such a meaningless war? If so, does this mean that unity is not something to pray for, because unity is achieved by a refusal to go to war and, by doing so, to make a statement?

How can I bring all of this together? What is the meaning of Christian unity in the context of conflict and war? Is Christian unity something that reaches across firing lines? Does it mean uniting in spite of differences? In matters of war, can we have a unity in

diversity, where each one keeps to his or her own political opinions and convictions and where faith is separated from national interests and patriotism?

Or is the question of a preemptive war something that deserves to be declared *status confessionis*? Is this war something to be compared to the Apartheid question, about which the Lutheran World Federation in 1977 and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 1982 declared to be a “stance of confession”? Is not a preemptive war something that is incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ, where the truth and nothing less than the truth is at stake?

Is unity between those who favor a war and those who are against it something that is not possible? Does it mean that no place exists for toleration, that there is no other way but to draw a line? Does it mean that any compromise is nothing but cheap unity that compromises the gospel and the truth?

Is Christian unity possible in contexts of severe conflict, preemptive war, or a so-called just war? Unity takes on importance in a context of disunity or disagreement. Can unity survive severe conflict? Are unity, truth, and peace the first victims within a context of conflict and times of war? Can Christian unity transform such conflict? If so, how?

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we are invited to reflect on our disunity. We have to confess that conflict divides us; war separates us from each other. But this separation is not between those here in the United States and those there in the Middle East; rather, it is a separation between Christians within each region. We have to confess that we are not witnesses of Christ at all. We listen to our politicians more than we listen to our Lord; we follow the voice of nationalistic patriotism more than we follow the kingdom of God, whether we live in Palestine, in the United States, or in Iraq. We fail to proclaim a clear and sound message to the world, so that the world might believe.

The Bible reminds us that we have this treasure in clay jars—treasure in clay jars. There is neither faith nor unity outside of our human and national settings. We are not super people. We exist as Christians within certain social, socio-economical, and political settings. These settings influence how we think, how we see things, and how we view conflicts.

Yet, within our clay jars, within our contexts and mindsets and political convictions, we have the treasure of the gospel. In the ordinary we experience the special foretaste of the kingdom. Through the broken clay shreds we see the treasure. In fact, our witness to unity makes sense only if and when we live it within our limitations, thus, providing opportunities for the treasure of the kingdom of God to shine through them.

We might not be able to stop the war, but we can be witnesses for a treasure of peace and unity that is entrusted into these clay jars.

Amen.

Since 1988, the Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, a native of Bethlehem, has been serving as the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem. He has been active in developing a contextual Christian theology in the Arab-Palestinian context as well as in interfaith dialogue. Dr. Raheb currently serves as guest professor at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and as the Mission Partner in Residence on the Worldwide Ministries Division staff of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).