

**Remarks to the Eleventh Churchwide Assembly
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
Friday, August 21, 2009**

I have been thinking about my 23 years as a parish pastor and how differently I would go into various contexts. Gathering with a family or people who had just experienced loss, or who perhaps were wondering if they still belonged, or felt deeply that ones to whom they belong had been severed from them, I would probably turn to these words:

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? [. . .] For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:34-35, 38-39).

If I were going into a family, group, or community that had always wondered if they belonged, and suddenly now had received a clear affirmation that they belonged and the dividing walls and feelings of separation seem to have dropped away, that would be a very different. I would probably read these words:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh, he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. [. . .] In him, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (Ephesians 2:13-14, 21-22).

Then I thought, what if those two groups were together, but also present were those who had neither experienced loss nor the dividing wall of separation coming down, but were worried whether what had occurred might sever our unity in Christ and if their actions might have contributed to reconciliation or separation? If all those people were together in a room, I would read from Colossians:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:14-17).

That passage invites those deeply disappointed today to expect the freedom to continue to admonish and to teach in this church. And so, too, it calls those who have experienced reconciliation today to humility. We are called to clothe ourselves with love. But we are all called to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, remembering always that we are called in the one body. I invite you into important, thoughtful, prayerful conversations about what this means for our life together. It is absolutely important for me that we have the conversation together.

I ended my oral report with these words: "We finally meet one another not in our agreements or our disagreements, but at the foot of the cross, where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ."

Let us pray. Oh, God, gracious and holy, mysterious and merciful, we meet this day at the foot of the cross, and there we kneel in gratitude and awe that you have loved us so much that you would give the life of your son so that we might have life in his name. Send the Spirit of the risen Christ that has been breathed into us. May it calm us. May your Spirit unite us. May it continue to gather us. In Jesus' name, AMEN.