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## *That They All May Be One*

**An evensong meditation by the Rev. Salmoon Bashir  
Observing the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity**

Seven years ago, I lived in London in the Community of St. Anselm as a resident member. The community of St. Anselm is an ecumenical community where every year 10 -15 young people come and spend a year in praying, studying and service to the poor in the city of London and across the U.K. The year when I was there, we had 15 resident members from 10 different countries, and 11 different Christian denominations. Growing up in Pakistan I never had an idea of the divided Church. Due to severe persecution, there is a strong bond between different Christian denominations in Pakistan as they come together and unite with one another. However, that year in London I learned about the other side of Christian unity. My heart broke and I cried multiple times as I saw and experienced so much division between Christian churches.

During that year, I attended a lecture of Bishop Jo Wells, who currently serves as a Deputy Secretary General of the Anglican Communion. I asked her a question: What is Christian unity? We talk a lot about being One in Christ, but we seem to be the opposite of being united in Christ! And she gave me a wonderful illustration of Christian unity explaining it as an orchestra where everyone in the group plays a different instrument but as a whole, they create a wonderful harmony, and the audience enjoys the beautiful music. Now when I think of Christian unity, I always imagine it as listening to wonderful music played by an orchestra. Unity means bringing whatever gifts we have and offering them to God in many different ways. Unity does not mean uniformity.

This week we are observing a tradition of Week of Prayer for Christian Unity according to Jesus' prayer "that they all may be one." Since 1908, the Church celebrates and observes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity from January 18 to January 25. The observance of Prayer lasts eight full days. It starts with the feast day of the confession of St. Peter and ends with the feast of the conversion of St. Paul. The two giant pillars of Christianity who had arguments and somewhat opposite views but served Christ in their own ways.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity invites all members of the body of Christ to remember one another in prayer and strengthen the bonds of love and mutual mission that we share in Jesus Christ. Every year, Churches from all over the world choose a theme for the whole week, last year it was Minnesota Council of Churches that came up with the theme "Do Good, Seek justice." This year the theme was chosen by an ecumenical team from Burkina Faso, a small country in West Africa. This year theme is "You shall love the Lord your God ... and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The parable today from the gospel of Luke is quite familiar to most of us. We remember that parable as a parable of Good Samaritan. When an expert of the law came to Jesus and asked him how he can inherit the eternal life, Jesus told him "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself." And in that dialogue lawyer asked Jesus 'who is my neighbor, who must I love and who do I not need to love? Who is my neighbor? What are the boundaries of loving my neighbor.'

When we think of a neighbor our imagination goes to the people who live in our neighborhood. People who are part of our circle. People who pray like us or people who go to similar churches as we do. Do we think of a neighbor as just a person who lives next door, or a person who checks our mail when we are out of town?

My brothers and sisters, Jesus talks about going beyond our boundaries to unite in love, care and fellowship with one another. Samaritans historically were considered outcasts and outsiders for the Jews. And Jesus in his parable told the expert of the law that a Samaritan was also their neighbor. The person with whom you

might have least in common, that person is also your neighbor. And friends, Jesus called us to love THAT neighbor as ourselves, to love the whole body of Christ, which means all of us, to your left and right, to your front and behind. And when we extend that love to those who are outside of our designated "circle" then those strangers become our neighbors as we become one in Christ.

Remember, unity is not uniformity. Loving doesn't mean to forget all the differences and the type of unity Jesus is calling us toward is where people can observe differences and still love one another. Such unity is between the people who think differently, who pray in different ways but at the end of the day each one of them can contribute to build the body of Christ. Until the time when true visible unity arrives, listening to and receiving the gifts of difference enriches us all.

A few years ago during Eucharist in Westminster Abbey, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa said: "Unity within the body of Christ is not simply about avoiding disputes, as St. Paul said, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together," In many parts of the world Christians are killed and churches burned not because they are Catholic, or Anglican, or Pentecostals, or Evangelicals but because they are Christians. **In their eyes, we are already one!" We are already one, through our one faith, one baptism and one hope in Christ.**

My dear brothers and sisters, may be God is radically inviting us today to walk in love through the power of the Holy Spirit, be faithful to our call to love one another, one faith, and one Lord Jesus Christ, and be the instrument of love, peace, justice, and mercy so the Jesus' prayer may be fulfilled for all the believers that they may all be one. By seeing Christian unity as the image of orchestra, of different instruments but harmonizing sounds, we can present all our voices from this and every church to the global Universal Church together to one Lord Jesus Christ who is one hope and one light of this Holy Catholic and Apostolic church. **Amen!**