

“THEY’LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS BY OUR LOVE”

Praise the Lord, church! God is faithful, and God is good—all the time! God has led us together to this moment in time, and I am tremendously honored and humbled to have been chosen to serve as the next General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada. I stand here on the shoulders of my 7 predecessors, and I give special thanks tonight for the ministry, leadership, friendship and collegueship of the Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins, and her service to the Church over the past 12 years.

I also stand here as the first person of color, the first African-American, to be called as General Minister and President. 100 years ago, in 1917, the National Christian Missionary Convention was formed by African-Americans in the Stone-Campbell movement, led by a former slave, Preston Taylor. My spiritual genealogy includes the Rev. Robert H. Peoples, former pastor of my home congregation, then Second Christian Church, here in Indianapolis, who was instrumental in shaping the merger agreement that ultimately united the NCMC with the general ministries of the church to form what we now call the National Convocation. I must acknowledge this history, and celebrate those African-American leaders, lay and clergy, who have loved this church so much, and who have made this day possible. To my home congregation, Light of the World Christian Church, the current pastor, Dr. David Hampton, and to my mentor, Dr. T. Garrott Benjamin, Jr., I say simply, I thank God for you and what you have meant to my family, and to my ministry.

For the last 12 years, I have served the University of Chicago Divinity School as Dean of Students. To the alumni of Disciples Divinity House in Chicago, thank you for being friends, colleagues, classmates, and to those who have studied during my tenure, thank you for giving me such great insight and hope for the future of God’s church. My colleagues, Dean Kris Culp, and Rev. Cynthia Lindner have been mentors, colleagues, and friends of longstanding.

For the last 8 years, I have served the First Christian Church of Downers Grove, IL as their senior pastor. I will always thank my God upon every remembrance of you. What a gift to serve God together, to be witness to all those miracles on 63<sup>rd</sup> St! I will carry you in my heart always---God has great things in store, and I can’t wait to see what God will do in the years ahead! It has been a privilege to serve you!

My family genealogy is deep in the state of Indiana, with roots in both the Lost Creek and Roberts settlements, two of the oldest free black settlements in the state, dating back to the early 1820’s and so it is a particular joy that this moment is happening here in my home state. To my family, who raised me with a pride in my heritage, and my Hoosier history, thank you. To my husband, Walter, and our son, Mitchell, thank you for your unconditional love and support.

Over the past few days, we have been exploring together what it means to be “one.” Over the past several months, I have been seeking God’s wisdom and guidance, seeking to hear from God how

the church that we all love might move into the future, living out the witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and standing firmly in the exhortation that God gave through the prophet, Micah: to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. As Disciples, we affirm, first and foremost, that

“As members of the Christian Church,  
We confess that Jesus is the Christ,  
the Son of the living God,  
and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world.

“We also affirm that in Christ's name and by his grace, we accept our mission of witness and service to all people. We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in God's covenant of love which binds us to God and to one another.”

(from the Preamble to the Design)

This is who we say we are as members of the Christian Church. As we have learned from our phenomenal preachers this week, Jesus has already prayed for us, that we might be one, but not a superficial unity with warm moments that evaporate once we release our hands held for just a moment. The unity for which Jesus prayed, and to which we are committed as we live out our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, has a primary purpose: “...that the world may know that you [God] have sent me, and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:23b, NRSV) That “polar star”, unity, is not just for us, but so that those who look at us might say, “Wow! Look at them! That God thing, that Jesus is real! Look how they love God, look how they love each other, and look how they show their love to the world!” The witness that our radical love, hospitality and unity can make is what compels us to yield ourselves to be guided by that star.

Our striving for unity is perhaps the most powerful way in which we bear witness that the love of God is real and present in the world. If we can hold one another in community, even in the presence of tensions that result from human differences of various dimensions of identity, socio-economic status, geography, theology and politics, we can be an example to the world to say that we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and his church are so important that we can work together despite those differences to ensure that God's message of love is shared and lived out in the world. This is, I believe, what Jesus prayed for, and it is what I believe we are called to live out as disciples/Disciples of Christ.

Imagine what it can look like---looking at a community of believers who have placed the love of God and neighbor above all else, who do not demonize differences as deficient but seek to understand one another in light of our uniqueness and diversity; who are willing for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ to stand shoulder to shoulder, working through differences in priorities, opinions, methods and goals—always yielding to the vision of how the world might be able to see real love among us and through us. This is not an easy vision, and it will take not just the best of what is in us, but it will also take the best of what God can do in and through us. It is a beautiful, gritty, necessary vision that we must pursue, empowered by the love of God, led by the example

of Jesus Christ, and guided by the Holy Spirit. We will need to learn how to have difficult conversations, to go beyond the standard training sessions, to sit with one another, be uncomfortable at times, and learn how to hear one another fully, to place ourselves in one another's shoes and honor each other's identity and lived experiences.

Learning how to have the conversations, how to engage one another honestly is a skill set that we need to acquire and use. I have learned from and used the work of my friend, Julia Middleton, who works with global business leaders to help them acquire what she calls "cultural intelligence" or CQ. CQ is based on the premise that we must not only be self-aware, but learn to listen; to really listen and understand the values and opinions of others in order to work effectively with them. And more than just listening, it is making sure that everyone actually feels heard by ensuring that you have articulated to their satisfaction what they themselves have said. Before you formulate a counter argument, learn to listen and understand what the other person is actually saying. Paying attention to the culture of others, and understanding how it influences the ways in which we all communicate can help us actually communicate difficult truths. I've used the principles of CQ in multi-cultural workshops with churches, and with graduate students at the Divinity School. I was privileged to travel to Colombia with a delegation from DOM and Global Ministries a few months ago. I saw the power of truth-telling as members of peasant communities engaged with members of the FARC who had wreaked such horrendous violence and death upon them. Listening to difficult truths was necessary in order to offer forgiveness and work towards justice and reconciliation. It's hard work, and it must be done. We can't just say "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you", or even "can't we all just get along?" We have to tell the truth, face it, and engage in honest work to move to justice. Whether in Colombia in the mountains outside Medellin and Cali, or on the south side of Chicago, in the rural South or the west coast, there is some truth-telling we need to do in order to forge a path toward justice. Only then is reconciliation possible. And only by telling the truth and working for justice and reconciliation can we live into the unity we affirm.

It is the power of the Spirit of God that will allow us to walk together, modeling not only the idea of unity, but bearing faithful witness to the cost of unity. Love costs, being a follower of Christ costs you something. We need help! At least I know I do! Jesus himself reminds us in John 15 that he is the source and model of the love and service we are called to share. In John 15: 4, Jesus teaches, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." (John 15:4, NRSV).

Did you get that? We cannot do this on our own strength! If you have been a part of any human organization, you know that there are always imperfect dynamics at play. Despite our loftiest visions and dreams, we in and of ourselves are human. This is what one of our noted Disciples theologians meant when he said, "unity is not human agreement; it is a gift of God."

Abide is one of my favorite words. When I was young, I liked the comforting hymn that said, "Abide with me; fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee; Help of the helpless, O abide with me." It seems that "abiding" was a calm, almost lullaby state, where I would be resting in the arms of Jesus. But the word "abide"

actually means to remain. It requires an intentional decision to continue, to stay put, to commit, , or as the elder saints used to say, “stand flat-footed”, no matter what. When you abide in Christ, your spiritual life is one of prayer, Bible study, and other spiritual disciplines that develop your spiritual muscles so that you can indeed love and serve as Christ has commanded. The more we abide in Christ, the stronger we become. And here is the beautiful thing: Christ says that he will abide in us. He will stay in us, with us. Only then do we have the spiritual resources to walk with one another in love and unity, despite differences, despite disagreements. Only when we are abiding in the Word of God, seeking to discern the light of Scripture; only when we are in relationship with God through prayer and meditation, when we seek to enter into that secret place that Psalm 91 invites us to enter---only when we abide in Christ, and when Christ abides in us, and when we are obedient to the command to love others as Jesus has loved us, will we be prepared to move forward as a church that is committed to being the church for this time.

The realities around us are clear: mainline denominations are declining, church today is not what church used to be. But this is what I believe: if we abide in Christ, Christ will abide in us. And the world will know that we are Christians by our love. We are Disciples of CHRIST. We are followers of Christ, not just any club. What we have to offer is the love of God, the grace of God, and the gospel of the saving acts and witness of Jesus Christ. Across our country, in our own neighborhoods and communities and around the world, people are in need of love, human dignity, employment, education, food, housing, justice, peace. We will have the strength to work in service of our shared humanity if we abide in Christ. We can only do justly and love mercy and kindness if we are walking humbly with God, if we are abiding in Christ, and Christ in us.

As we prayerfully discern together how God is leading our church, I am committed to my relationship with God, my discipleship as a follower of Christ, to walk humbly with God so that I am prepared to do justly and love kindness. I offer myself in fellowship and covenant to my fellow believers to do the work of ministry, to be a faithful leader and co-laborer, a servant within our movement and a faithful steward of all its resources. I pray that together we can provide the world with an example of the radical love and hospitality of God that will allow us to be witnesses of the gospel of Jesus Christ in this time. May they look at our fellowship, with all its diversity, with all its struggles, and marvel at God’s goodness and love. May it be so.