

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church & Neighborhood House  
The 31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
November 1, 2009

**Prayer for Illumination**

**One:** Be with us, O God, as we listen to the words of those people whose stories tell the presence of your love and wisdom for all the ages.

**Many:** **Guide us, O God, in our reflection so that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, in your will discover peace, and in your love find our salvation.**

**First Reading: Hebrews 9:11-14**

But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

Sh'ma Ysrael

ד שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד. 4 Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

ה וְאַהַבְתָּ, אֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ. 5 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

**Gospel Reading: Mark 12:28-34**

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "'God is one, and besides God there is no other'; and 'to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Hear, O Israel  
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I have always felt comforted the times of continuity between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in our study and readings. It seems most right when these three archetypes reveal their common heritage as one.

I also respect the reasons that the “One” has become many over millennia. Yet I long for knowing what it must have been like when they were as close to one, as well, one.

There are a lot of reasons for this, not the least of which is the price of dividing and the conflict in division, always measured, to some degree, in human pain, suffering, and death.

It is a romantic notion, perhaps, an unrealistic dream - that if we were all one – even in our differences,

if we were somehow one – with respect for the freedom to be individuals, as well;

if we could do this in some simple way –

that the pain and suffering would be greatly changed, through the elimination of domination and oppression inherent in division – a division, dominance and oppression too often framed in the practices of “competing” religions themselves.

We have a very current example of what some would call an invitation – others a push to membership in the design of a streamlined process for Anglicans who wish to leave their church seeped in conflict, to change denominations and more easily and quickly become members of the Roman Catholic Church.

Perhaps, perhaps if we were better at unifying, we would be trying to help a denomination in conflict to stay united and work out the problems as a witness and model for others to follow. Maybe one day....

And I don't think this is such a far-fetched notion.

In our readings this morning, there is evidence from Paul, Jesus, and Mark – that indeed we are first united.

I find the narrative that Paul continues in his letter to the Hebrews as touching and intensely poignant.. Over the last few weeks, we have been learning about Jesus as the High Priest of the Order of Melchisedek, which set him above and apart from all others. And, with that in mind, Paul raises Jesus the High Priest to the greatest heights in Jesus' unconditional Sacrifice in the giving of his life for

the sake of those he loved, so that they might find eternal life. We are moving closer to Jerusalem. You can feel it as we proceed.

And as we follow Paul's letter with Mark's passage, we gain even deeper insight into Jesus in his exchange with the scribes.

One of them asks Jesus what is the most important question of all.

In his reply, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6, the sch'ma, frequently referred to as the most important of all Hebrew prayers recited twice a day by observant Jews. It is a mitzvah, which in Hebrew means "commandment." We also know the meaning of the word "mitzvah" as an act of human kindness. But in Jesus' time, it would be considered one of the commandments in the Torah.

This, then, is the response of both an observant Jew, Jesus, and the Son of God, as referred to in the earlier passages of by Mark.

It is not such a great leap to see Jesus in the tension of the old and the coming new. It is all present in him. A more developed sense of this is frequently referred to in the symbolism of the cross and the tear in the temple wall that awaits him and humankind.

Jesus was far from conciliatory. We know that. But he did usher in change, and the sch'ma was at the center of his teachings. No eradication of freedoms, conscience, or glorifying God in the mystery of who God is in each of us. Just the simple command to know God as One and to love one another.

This, I could argue, is what caused Jesus the most trouble with those who held the power and authority. Jesus could not be argued with because what he taught and preached was, simply, not of this world's ways. There was and continue to be no way to argue such things with any effectiveness. That must mean something, don't you think?

Today, is November 1<sup>st</sup>. All Saints Day. This is an important day in our calendar for remembrance of those who have gone before us on their journeys; those who advocate for us as saints in the form that is ahead for us all: our great cloud of witnesses, as Paul says later in Hebrews.

However, today we are reminded of another date: October 31, 1517 – the day that Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg. His act was a significant and defiant event in the history of the Reformation - the split that was fueled by what were seen as excesses and abuses by the Roman Catholic Church.

Yet, it was one hundred years before Martin Luther posted his charges, that Jan Hus actively promoted the ideas of another radical thinker, John Wycliffe. Among

many things, Jan Hus taught that people should be able to read the Bible in their own language and they should oppose the tyranny of the Roman church that threatened anyone owning a non-Latin Bible with – execution.

Execution, for the Word must be controlled and protected. Protecting God and God's Word. I'm curious, if one thinks they can protect the Word, as in "the Word in the beginning" – does that make the protector think that they are God?

How could God be anything other than free....

This sort of thinking and challenges of the church of his time cost Jan Hus his life. He was burned at the stake in 1415, some say his executioners used Wycliffe's manuscript Bibles as kindling for the fire.

In his last words, Hus is said to have predicted Martin Luther's involvement in the Protestant Reformation with he called out as the fires were raised, "in 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed." Almost to the day, Luther began his open challenge.

Today, we are blessed to have with us Tomas Najbrt, who is visiting from the Czech Republic. Like Martin Luther and Jan Hus did in their times, Tomas earns his living by singing and performing for the church in his and our homeland.

He knows all about Jan Hus and the Reformation, for he is a good student of church history, but also because he has lived in time of an oppressive government that once prevented him from doing the work he does now.

You can also wish Tomas a Happy Birthday – it was yesterday, on Reformation Day! And, Happy Birthday to Holly Nedelka, also a Reformation Day Birthday person!

It was as a result of the Velvet Revolution, a non-violent overthrow of the Communist government in Czechoslovakia, that a peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia took place, forming two new states: the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as the Communist regime collapsed. It was January 1, 1993 the the "chage" as Tomas refers to it officially took place.

You may wish to talk with Tomas more about this. Arguably, the change has been a good one for freedom and democracy.

It may seem that this split and others that have produced positive changes undermine my position of longing for unity.

I have two answers for that.

The first is in geopolitical terms and suggests that the continued splitting and separating of nations and religions are the continued symptoms of a once unified existence. An existence that has gone awry and continues fragmenting in the same way as the physical universe continues its expansion.

The other explanation I would offer is in today's readings, "The Lord is One...Love your neighbor." These are the unifying underpinings and higher order of the one relationship that is not of this world, and, maybe, the only one we really need to focus upon. It would seem to make sense that the God that created us in the first place is grand and expansive enough to embrace us all, even with our notions of mutual exclusivity.

As we come to the table together this morning, let's try to transcend this world and consciously be aware of the "Other World" of which we are a part. The one that has been unified long before this planet or time was even formed. It is that place that I long for, it is that place for which I believe we were all made. It is that place I most often find with you and the mission and worship we share at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House.

Sch'ma Ysrael.

Hear O Israel, the Lord is One. And so are we...

Amen.