

Prayer for Christian Unity

January 21st, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our hope.

Earlier this winter, we were hiking on a beautiful trail in Prince Albert National Park with our dogs and we were enjoying the trees, and we saw other happy dog prints in the snow, when a cyclist came by and said

See all these timber wolf tracks? They sure like this trail...

And then he biked away. Do you think we could focus on the trees after that?

As humans, we are naturally drawn to focus on danger – *more* than to look for things that are pleasing. It provides some protection for us. And it's one thing when it's a pack of timber wolves, but most of us will focus more attention on one negative situation than we will to the many, many blessings of the day.

Have you ever had one criticism or worry just go around and around in your mind all evening? Psychologists Paul Rozin and Edward Royzman first coined the term "negativity bias" to describe the phenomenon of giving more weight or power to negative things than positive things of a similar scale.

Bad news travels so fast, and takes up so much space in our minds, because it kicks in our survival instinct. It's why bad first impressions are so hard to overcome, you just keep thinking of the bad thing no matter what a person does. It's why bad news always feels like the most important news. *That's Negativity Bias*. And we have a lot of bad news to contend with, don't we?

Jesus had a lot of bad news as well. Today's gospel reading from Mark starts like this...

Now after John was arrested...

John- Jesus' dear cousin. John who baptized and honoured Jesus. John who was ministering to *all the Judeans* by the river and they were going to him for help. *John who loved to eat honey* is arrested. When this happens, Jesus has every right to be enraged about John's arrest, and terrified that he will be arrested next. He has every right to go from place to place saying, "John's been arrested- look out! Hide! This king is an evil tyrant and we have to do something!"

Bad news bad news bad news bad news ... (news feed on screen)

That would be natural. But this is what the gospel says-

*Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the **good news** of God, and saying,*

*"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the **good news**."*
Believe in the Good News.

Somehow, the bad news of John's arrest and the danger that was afoot in the land drove Jesus to spread **Good News**. Jesus does not deny the pain or the danger in his community. We know he hears the cries of the sick and the poor **But his mission is to confront the bad with the goodness of God in a world where bad things are happening. Jesus' ministry reminds us that the good is greater than the bad – And that everywhere there is bad news, God is already at work.**

Our scriptures today have two stories where God calls people to put their worst thoughts aside and help spread **good news**.

The first is Jonah. He was called to the city of Nineveh to give them a message from God to make some changes. But when Jonah thought of the Ninevites he only thought of the bad things they did- they were warlike, merciless to their enemies. Of course, Jonah did not want to go to those people. Remember he tried to run away and was swallowed by a fish... But eventually, he put his terrible ideas about the Ninevites on hold and was able to bring them God's message. Even though he personally did not believe they were worth saving, he had the nerve to *follow* God, even when he did not *agree* with God.

Our gospel today also involves fish- but probably not the big kind that swallowed Jonah. As he is going out to spread the **Good News**, it says,
Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen.
And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

We always wonder what made these guys leave their jobs "*immediately*" to follow Jesus. Was it his charisma? or his strength? Did they hate fishing?

Today, I wonder if it could have been the **Good News**. In this world where the bad news threatens to swallow us up, maybe the fishermen were so thirsty for Good News that they followed *immediately*.

Like Jonah, who had to help people he did not believe were worth saving, the disciples would bring Good News to people that had been thrown away. Leaders who were abusive, People with contagious diseases, Tax collectors – They would "fish for people" in Jesus' words. The disciples were not called to *agree* with Jesus. They were not called to *understand* Jesus. They are called to *follow* Jesus. And that meant overriding their natural fear and negativity about what would happen if they left their boats. And Jesus showed them that the Good News was not just for them it's for everybody.

The Good News of God, is that no one is excluded from God's compassion.

In John chapter 17, Jesus prays a long prayer to God on our behalf, and part of it goes like this,
Father, I pray that they will all be one,
just as you and I are one—

I pray that they will all be one- like a mother praying when her kids are fighting. In this you can hear Christ's love for *all* people, no matter what side of the news they're on. God's wish is to draw all of us into the circle of goodness.

And this teaching is the inspiration for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that we celebrate today. Since 1908, Christians from many denominations, United, Catholic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal- all over the globe take time to pray for the unity of the church, the unity of the nations, and for peace. Here at McClure, we have promised to pray for and work together with Holy Spirit Roman Catholic Parish.

The United Church of Canada- was created by several denominations coming together- We have a motto that we are *United and Uniting* – In this Church, we have an obligation to continue the uniting that began in 1925 when the United Church was born. But Unity is hard. Especially when it goes against our natural instincts. For Jonah, it was *hard* to imagine that God could care so much about the Ninevites. For the disciples it was *hard* to accept how far Jesus would go to help and to save his

enemies. When we think of uniting, or just working with people we don't agree with or even like *our negativity bias kicks in full-force.*

In the worldwide church- It looks like this... We ask...Who is eligible for ordination? When should a person be baptized? What is the meaning of communion?

Those are popular questions to fight about... And we place more focus on these few things, than on the hundreds and thousands of beliefs we share. The Ecumenical Movement- Is a labor of love . But it is a labor. We must *work* towards the Unity that Christ calls us to. We call it the Week of *Prayer* for Christian Unity because this movement where we follow Jesus into mending the world begins with prayer. Maybe every situation where we are struggling to see the other side or overcome a serious obstacle should begin with prayer.

Prayer is very Powerful. In prayer, Jonah found courage get up off the beach and talk with his enemies. Prayer provides a way for us to battle the negativity in ourselves and our negative assumptions about others. At prayer, we cast off the fear and the threat of encountering others- and trust more in God. And at prayer, we practice turning our minds and hearts to the righteousness and truth of God. At prayer we dream of God's world, as it *could* be. At prayer we have everything in common with everyone else. We all ask for things we need and think of our children. Most of all, prayer grounds us in the discipline of gratitude-

so that we are able to see that our blessings far outnumber our curses.

Our similarities are many more than our differences.

There are a lot more trees than wolves.

When we pray, we *are* unified with one another and with God. So today, on this International Week of Prayer for Unity, let us thank God that prayer is always available to us every time negativity wants to take up more than its share of space.

This morning, may our prayers open our hearts to believe in the Good News.

Give us courage to follow in the way of Good News,

And the Audacity to share a word of Good News with someone who really needs to hear it.

Amen.

Rev. Emily Carr

Why Is The News Always So Depressing? The Negativity Bias, explained. (January 2024) Retrieved from <https://thedecisionlab.com/biases/negativity-bias#:~:text=Psychologists%20Paul%20Rozin%20and%20Edward,different%20ways%3A%20negative%20potency%2C%20steeper>