

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity  
January 24, 2016  
First Presbyterian Church, Redwood Falls, Minnesota  
Sermon by Elona Street-Stewart

## **Proclaim the Mighty Acts of the Lord**

Good Morning,

Mitakuye Oyasin, all my relations. Grace to you and peace from God, who breathed life into us all as children and clans, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Let us Pray: We come together in this circle of trust, praising you with thanksgiving. When you call us, our response is to be “We are here in your KIN-dom, we are your people, living together in a house you built of grace and blessed with many rooms. May we find unity and community in our diversity here. Please fill us with your promise of new beginnings, that as your people we might do the work you have called us to do, not only this day but every day, not only here but everywhere, not only now, but for all time. AMEN

I thank the Creator for bringing us here this afternoon. Thank you for coming to pray together, for each other, for ourselves, for those we know, those we don’t and those who we are yet to meet

I welcome the call to prayer; I start my day praying as I wake up. I practice prayer in my morning exercise routine, and end my day in prayer. What do I pray about — prayers of thanksgiving for joys, and prayers of grace for sorrow, for appreciation of the amazing world shaped by the Creator, grace for meals and those who grow food. I keep photos of my grandchildren by my desk to pray for them through their school day; I pray by name for specific peacemakers who put their life at risk in dangerous situations all around the world, for emergencies, for coworkers and strangers in the news, for church reports and medical diagnoses, for times of birth and times of death — these prayers measured by the breaths I take, or as my eyes blink. I remember a dream in which I was praying, out loud, and was so ecstatic to realize I even

prayed in my sleep. Prayer is a spiritual language used for conversation with God about the circle of relations that surrounds me, about all the relationships that bind us together.

The concept of unity embodied in our community is at the heart of the theme of this week for us as individual Christians from different churches praying common prayers.

Blending this experience of people and place, we open ourselves to the possibilities of a new dimension of our interactions, a way of understanding the knowledge of ourselves as a new people in the body of Christ. We are taking the first step in experiencing the way of new life. Through this experience we imagine how people and creatures, communities and cultures, religions and ethnicities were created in relation to one another. From 1 Peter 2:10: *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's People. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* All my relatives, in unity, we are called to be the KIN-dom of God.

We don't get there without struggle. Our Christian traditions are a living reality often inseparable from our conflicts as Christian communities within historic and dogmatic boundaries. Our diversity comes at the cost of the marginalized and oppressed, and is broken by the ways we discriminate by language, culture, economics, gender, creed and domain.

Like the people in the Bible, we must grapple with our histories and stories that personify our fragmentation from God and each other. Prophets, priests and poets warned them over and over that until they reconciled their fragile relationships, they were not THE people of God, but peoples of God incapable of perfect unity.

We have to confess that we too are broken and misuse our gifts — poor stewards of the earth, social responsibilities, possessions and power. We hurt each other and blame victims for the injustice they suffer.

Powerless and destitute voices cry out to us in desperation. "In God's name help us" comes to us from waves of immigrants, victims of war and terrorist attacks, homeless youth, Black Lives Matter protests, those crushed by

earthquakes and battered by storms, thirsty children exposed to lead in Michigan, trafficked children in our own state of Minnesota.

Peter tell us: *Once You had NOT received mercy, but now You have.* So what can we do more together, less apart? Grapple. Grapple with these questions so that we can renew an emerging sense of purpose, partnership, context and call in congregations struggling for answers about being God's own in the world. You and I are called to share God's love with the world in service to others. God gives us practice — think of today as starting “practice week” — to love, accept, fail, forgive, and welcome in unity.

I am proud to be Christian. It is my privilege to serve and participate across all levels of the church. And, although as an American Indian my people accepted Christ for centuries long before many of your ancestors came to this continent, I dislike being culturally marginalized and historically ignored by the church. The irony is that the church, as both an agency and a communion, needs the cultural and spiritual presence of my people, and other people of color, to revoke the church's negative, abusive and racist past to reinvigorate the life of worship and justice ministries in all we do.

I do not know if the church is prepared to hear this message now, but until we do, and have white people join us, regrettably, we just hide our light, worse, we flip the switch, pull the plug and shut the door.

Where is your place of courage? Churches that brave an encounter with God through a covenant offering sprinkled with the salt of shared and purposeful servant leadership, that have the saltiness of confession, the repudiation of corporate privilege, and the “energizer power” light of prophetic call will be ones best able to help their people proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord in the midst of a world that trivializes Christ's message YET needs him ever more.

What does it mean to show God's love in a time where fear defines the lives of our communities, our political discourse, and the nation?

I offer you this advice from Matthew 5: *You are blessed when you are at the end of your rope, you are blessed when you feel lost in grief, when you ache for righteousness, when you care, when you are pure in your heart, when you make*

*peace.* Rejoice and be glad, you are united as a body of Christ in the Kin-dom of God.

These prayers of unity emerge not only as a rejection of old stereotypes of racism and oppression, fears and rivalry, but also as a celebration of a new, “God-determined-identity” of new heroes and sheroes whose passion is to proclaim the mighty acts of God. In true witness they fight for justice, rule with mercy, and heal through peace. Their dissent, and ours too if we are with them, is animated by the salt of the covenant, Our prayers can’t be passive, they must be provocative! We don’t want prayers full of anger, they have to be stunningly keen to repel any threat to our covenant identity. We don’t have any more time to be ambiguous, instead our prayers must have the clarity of a laser light. Nope, can’t be insular; pray always in a fierce “explosion of love.” Let your light shine so bright so others can see your good works — works of justice, unity and community.

Generously season your prayers. Remember the command in Leviticus: *Every offering you shall season with salt, never allow yourself to make an offering that lacks salt.* And the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke press us to be the *salt of the earth, and warn when it has lost its taste it is no longer good for anything.*

Christianity needs a place to be fully Christian. So let’s move beyond the comfort zone of familiarity and reach out to other communities of faith. Rejoice that prayer is a language that speaks through all the complicated layers of relationships and identity. **To proclaim the mighty acts of God, calls for a radical and courageous expression of our faith. To pray for unity calls our Christian imagination to disrupt our cultural and religious fragmentation and embrace what is formed and what is given by God the creator.**

So, if we are on top of the hill, like a bright signal light on a busy highway, what do we see out there — a collision of identities, ideologies, expectations and beliefs. But wait, there’s more. We see teachers teaching, children learning; we see farmers feeding the hungry; we see well systems bringing living waters to the world; we see graduates in a two-year volunteer service corps; we see peacekeepers observing court systems; we see families

connected in seconds by social media propelled around the world; we see school lunchrooms composting food wastes; we see grass-roots circle dialogues protecting voting rights; we see local businesses training new-to-America employees; we see doctors discovering cures; and we see the church as sanctuary for thousands of refugees in Jesus' name

Thanks be to God for these mighty acts. Grace and gratitude for shining our light on the extraordinary dignity of all people.

Welcome all invited to come here, to join in prayers of unity, to share our vision and give God the glory

One-hundred-thirty years ago, Chief Joseph, Nez Perce, admonished us: "Treat all people alike. Give them the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. All people were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all relatives. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have the equal rights upon it." Amen, Amen, Still salty today.

This week of prayer in Christian Unity reflects an important covenant on faith and culture, on identity and purpose. We are in communion with others praying all around the world for greater visible unity of Christ's church

While we maintain our distinct life and orders, our exclusive liturgies, our separate worship and ordained service, we must meet our community needs in witness together, in defiance of disaster, disorder or death, and in critical witness to the mighty acts of the Lord. Maybe even more than critical, how about chronic witness — chronic being "confirmed, established, fixed, instilled, prevalent and seasoned."

We are called to be God's people, not just an aspiration, but a daily "feet on the ground" way to express our new identity in Christ.

The goal is to see our unity become our true being

What kind of life are we called to be for the future? Will we be a church of hope, reliable, trustworthy — a light on the hill, full of promise? Will we become a people of hope, like salt, to preserve the covenant with God, in our devotions and also in our dissent?

This is a pivotal moment; I invite you to be a part, to do the best you can to pray for each other as faithful leaders for tomorrow. I hope all of you, especially these young people, will continue to believe in the promises of Christ, made known in their baptism, and to see and understand what is so incredible and impressive about his ministry and resurrection. To know that the cross is the place where Christ bears the wounds and pain and tears for a broken world, that there we can hang up our bullying and racism and violence today, and rise, with Christ, to a future of hope, to be faithful in the public square, to do justice and to love kindness as the church.

Yes, once you were not a people, you had no name, but now you are God's people and they'll know you are Christians by your SALTINESS!