“Has Christ Been Divided?” This question, asked first by St. Paul in his first letter to the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 1:13), was of course the theme for the 2014 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and therefore for this service. Since Anglicans like me are famous for trying to hold together the extremes of a paradox and for believing that two, seemingly contradictory things can be true at the same time, I’d like to give a firm answer to that question: Has Christ been divided? Yes and No!

I’m probably not the first preacher this year to take that approach, but it seems to me to be the only truthful answer. As Paul himself taught and St. Teresa of Avila later elaborated upon, if the Church really is the Body of Christ here on earth, if “Christ really has no Body now on earth, but ours; no hands, no feet on earth but ours” then Christ is surely divided and divided badly. While we were one Church for a thousand years and divided into east and west for nearly six centuries after that, since the Reformation we have continued to splinter and fall apart until there are some 30,000 Christian communions or denominations in the world today.

Yet, if we get St. Paul’s clear implication in the First Corinthians passage, Jesus Christ himself is surely not divided. The apostle was pleading with his recalcitrant church in Corinth to overcome its rivalry and division precisely because they all claimed to follow the same Lord, regardless of how differently he may have been perceived and presented by Apollos or Cephas or even Paul himself.

And, it’s that conviction that the ecumenical movement shares, understanding that the closer we draw to Jesus, in our several divided communions, the closer we will draw to one another. And surely this is the truth behind the “spiritual ecumenism” written of so eloquently by Cardinal Walter Kasper or “receptive
ecumenism” which suggests that we might actually listen deeply and learn from one another in our ecumenical dialogues rather than seeking to trump one another by our own perceived faithfulness to the Gospel.

For nine years, I served as our Presiding Bishop’s Deputy for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, working out of our Church Center headquarters in New York City but traveling all over the world – from Moscow to the Philippines -- to various conferences and dialogues and ecumenical events seeking to represent The Episcopal Church, and the Anglican Communion, in our absolute commitment to Christian Unity. It was, to hold up another paradox, both a singular blessing and an exercise in frustration for most of those nine years!

Those of us who were around in the heady days of strong World and National Councils of Churches and working ecumenically in those halcyon days just after Vatican II thought the unity of the Church was close at hand. As a young priest in 1972, I thought we might have this whole thing wrapped up by about 1985!

Obviously, we were naïve. Although we’ve achieved much, including a number of full communion agreements and an increasing rapprochement between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, many have spoken of an “ecumenical winter” in recent years and it does seem that, for the time being, we may have gone about as far as we can go in some of our bilateral dialogues.

A fine new document – titled “Ecclesiology and Moral Discernment” – was recently released after several years of work by the Anglican-Roman Catholic Theological Consultation in the USA and it includes this sentence in its closing paragraphs: “It is hard to see how our differences in moral theology and ecclesiology will be resolved and it is not clear to many whether they should be. The ecumenical movement teaches that legitimate diversity has its place in the Church, and history demonstrates that this is true.” (Paragraph 65) So, does that suggest that we have gone about as far as we can go in ecumenical agreements? Or need to go?

Toward the end of my time as ecumenical officer, I got interested in the so-called “emergent church” movement. This is not yet another attempt to come up with a
“new church” or to return to the “perfect” church of the New Testament. It is more an attempt, by a group of younger pastors and scholars (often Evangelical in background) to pay attention to what the Spirit may be saying to the churches today. One such group writes, on its web site, “Emergent Village:”

“We are committed to honor and serve the church in all its forms – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Anabaptist. We practice “deep ecclesiology” – rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others, we see that every form of the church has both weaknesses and strengths, both liabilities and potential.”

“We believe that the rampant injustice and sin in our world requires the sincere, collaborative, and whole-hearted response of all Christians in all denominations, from the most historic and hierarchical, through the mid-range of local and congregational churches, to the most spontaneous and informal expressions. We affirm both the value of strengthening, renewing, and transforming existing churches and organizations, and the need for planting, resourcing, and coaching new ones of many kinds.”

“We seek to be irenic and inclusive of all our Christian sisters and brothers, rather than elitist and critical. We own the many failures of the church as our failures which humble us and call us to repentance, and we also celebrate the many heroes and virtues of the church, which inspire us and gives us hope.”

Well, I suppose one could hear those words as less than a commitment to the hard work of ecumenism and the full, visible, unity to which many of us have been committed. But, in the voices of these young Christians, can we not also hear echoes of Cardinal Kasper’s “spiritual ecumenism” and of the call to “receptive ecumenism” in our day? I sometimes think that the Holy Spirit is at work bringing about the unity for which Christ prayed in ways quite different than many of us in the ecumenical movement ever thought. And that our task today is to try to keep up with the Spirit, to truly hear what that Spirit is saying to the churches! It would not be the first time that we have been “surprised by the Spirit” in Christian history.
Let me close by sharing with you something I read earlier this year during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which has “the scent of the Spirit” around it, I think. It’s from an article by Fr. Roger Ferlo, the President of the newly-merged Bexley Seabury Theological Seminary, one of whose campuses is right here in Chicago. He’s talking about the centrality of Baptism in the ecumenical movement, but he says a surprising thing:

... baptism is not necessarily a rite of inclusion, nor perhaps should it be. As… Bishop Tom Breidenthal (in the Anglican Theological Review) has argued, we should learn to regard baptism not as a rite of inclusion but as a rite of expulsion. That word expulsion comes as something of a shock. Embracing our common baptism is not about finding a peaceful center where we can all feel comfortable and friendly and polite. To embrace our common baptism is to allow the Spirit to blast our centers apart. Jesus was baptized by John, and immediately the Spirit expelled him into the wilderness. Nicodemus wants to follow Jesus but to his horror he (thinks that) he needs to be expelled from the womb a second time. Andrew and Peter, James and John, abandoned the everyday world they knew, expelled by the Spirit into the presence of this strange man Jesus… leaving a puzzled and scandalized father Zebedee to ponder his lonely fate in the dust of their sudden departure.

The baptized community is not about inviting people in, which is what our ecumenical discussions try so hard to do, and to such frustrating and feeble effect. Baptism is not about widening the circle of insiders and distinguishing them from outsiders. Baptism makes us all outsiders, expelled from the center to inhabit the margins, driven by the Spirit out of our places of safety—whether it's our fishing boats or our churches, our racial prejudices or our economic comforts—to make common cause with the poor and the isolated, the refugee and the captive. One reason we may have entered an ecumenical winter is that there has just been too much talk of safety, or simply too much talk. Perhaps in this troubled season we might just let the Spirit empty us of churchy eloquence so that the cross, that ultimate sign of expulsion, might be revealed in all its power to save. Perhaps it's time for our churches in their ecumenical discussions to stop jockeying for position at the foot of the cross, and instead for the sake of all outsiders empty ourselves of our denominational certainties so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. (Pause)

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eloquence so that the cross, that ultimate sign of expulsion, might be revealed in all its power to save.

What might that mean, dear friends, for the ecumenical movement of today? I’m not sure I know quite yet. But I think it may mean that the movement will look a whole lot more like the missional vision of our young “emergents” than it does like the ecumenical dialogues I spent so much of my life engaged in.

It’s going to be about mission. Mission “to make common cause with the poor and the isolated, the refugee and the captive.” And to be on that mission together. Isn’t that what Pope Francis is trying to remind us all of today? I think it is.

So, if I may be permitted to paraphrase St. Paul: Christ did not send us (only) to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom (but with deeds of action) so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power!

Review complete text of the newsletter article “Baptism Makes Us All Outsiders,” prepared by Fr. Roger Ferlo, President of Bexley-Seabury Theological Seminary. The article was adapted from a sermon he preached to the Caravita Community in Rome during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. CLICK HERE