

Real Faith for Real People
“Why Not Meet in the Middle?”
I Peter 3:8-15

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Ours is an age of extremes—extreme sports, extreme make-overs, extreme politics. The best way to get your face on the evening news is to do something extreme—the weirder, the better.

When extremism infiltrates religion we have a problem. We have war between the Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. We have ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. We have endless conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinian. We have radical Muslims assuming all Americas to be infidels.

Our founder, John Wesley, knew about religious conflict. He saw it first-hand in England and he wanted no part of it. So he preached and practiced a religion of love. He navigated the high road of missionary zeal coupled with open-mindedness. He was neither rigid nor indifferent and he gave this instruction to his followers: “In essential beliefs, let us find Unity. In non-essential beliefs, let there be Freedom. In all things let there be Love.” On this World Wide Communion Sunday, let us find a meeting place.

LET US MEET AT THE CROSS, A PLACE OF HUMILITY

“Be compassionate and humble” (I Peter 3:8).

For most of my life, I’ve tried to maximize my strengths, and minimize my weaknesses. I thought it was the thing to do, and strengths do have their rewards. It feels good to win. Success is satisfying. Ladder climbing can be fun. Although, in more recent years, I have come to understand the notion that power is made perfect in weakness. As Paul said, *“I delight in weakness, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for when I am weak then I am strong.” (II Corinthians 12:10)* Weakness has its rewards. There are lessons to be learned in defeat that will never be realized in victory.

So, the universal symbol of the Christian Church is the Cross, an emblem of suffering and shame. Why, why not a fish, why not an Easter sunrise, why not a ship sailing into the unknown? Instead, we glory in the Cross, towering o’er the wrecks of time.

At the Cross, facts are faced. It is a cruel world after all. People fight. Governments

kill. Mothers weep. Friends fear for their lives. Say what you will about us Christians, but do not call us naive.

At the Cross, love is revealed. *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends,”* said Jesus.

At the Cross, the ground is level. It’s not about being a man or a woman, a Jew or a Greek, a poor man or a rich man, an American or a Korean; it’s about being a loved and forgiven child of God.

Meet me at the Cross – a place of humility, a place of compassion, a place of love.

LET US MEET IN CHRIST, A PLACE OF HOPE

“But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord” (I Peter 3:15).

Peter puts it this way: *“But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”*

Someone bumped into Billy Graham on an elevator. Stunned to be in the presence of the great evangelist, the person said, “Dr. Graham, You are a great man.” The ever humble Billy Graham replied, “No, I am not a great man. I have a great message.” I wish the Church of Jesus Christ could claim that word today. There are no great churches, there are no great preachers, there are no great congregations, we simply have a great Christ.

“In Christ, all things hold together” (Col 1:17). In Christ, we are compelled to love and forgive one another. In Christ, we have the absolute certainty that God is good all the time. Our hope for unity is nothing less than Christ in Us.

Wherever two or more people gather together, conflict is bound to follow. It happens in family, in communities, in churches, in countries, in the world. The very existence of the early Church was endangered by divisive arguments over circumcision, dietary laws, pagan worship, and gifts of the spirit. Peter and Paul did not always get along. Mark got fired. Yet, they managed to rise above their differences out of love and loyalty to Jesus Christ. Their mission superseded their misunderstandings.

When churches get together today, they argue about sex, about structure, about money, about management, the list is endless. Wesley would have nothing to do with those kinds of debates. “If you don’t want to baptize infants, so be it,” said Wesley. “If you prefer congregational systems to connectional systems, so be it,” said Wesley. “If your heart is with my heart in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ, take my

hand.” Could not Christ heal our differences if we bowed in humble submission to his will?

LET US WORK FOR CONSENSUS, A PLACE OF HARMONY

“Live in harmony with one another.” I Peter 3:8—What a motto!

What would it take for the religions of the world to live in harmony with one another? Mr. Wesley offered these suggestions:

Do not hurt one another. Do nothing unkind or unfriendly to each other.

Say all the good you can both of and to one another. In all conversation use only the language of love.

Harbor no unkind thought or unfriendly temper towards each other.

Endeavor to work together in whatever ways possible for the betterment of humanity.

It saddens me to think that religion is the root of much conflict in the world today. Surely, the body of Christ is broken again and again as Christians fight wars in Christ’s name and shun the very people he came to save. Let us repent of our sin.

Far, far too often, people are quick to regard their impulses as direct communication from God and the latest fad as some revelation of the Divine. We must pray to become truly wise.

Let us resolve to live by love, pure unbounded love that respects all God’s creation with thoughtfulness. Let us become this devoted to the Lord.

Let us humbly acknowledge that we do not have the last word on much of anything. “Give us ears to hear and hearts willing to receive thoughts that are not of our own making.”

Diamond Rio has a country song that has nothing to do with religion, but does invite us to meet in the middle. I close with a paraphrase of their lyrics:

If I’d start walking your way, you’d start walking mine.
We’d meet in the middle, close to Christ, the Divine
We’d gain a lot of ground, ’cause we’d both give a little
And there ain’t no road too long
When you meet in the middle.