

2018 Susquehanna Annual Conference
Opening Celebration Worship – *Bishop Jeremiah J. Park*
May 31, 2018

It's About Jesus Christ

Scripture Readings: John 17:20-26; Colossians 1:15-20

Grace upon each of you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

Welcome my sisters and brothers to the Ninth Session of the Susquehanna Annual Conference. What a joy we have to be Jesus' disciples and to gather together to worship and to praise our awesome God and give our witness of a church alive in Christ together for the sake of the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world!

I would like you to know that I feel so privileged to serve our beloved church with the committed, dedicated, mission-minded and generous people of the Susquehanna Conference. Under many challenging circumstances, God's people of the Susquehanna Conference, laity and clergy alike, continue to provide so many amazing, exhilarating, and powerful testimonies to what discipleship is about as they constantly extend themselves to offer so freely their gifts and graces to serve and love God and God's people in the world. The heart-warming evidence of your faithfulness and fruitfulness is all over the place. Thanks be to God for you! Indeed, the Susquehanna Conference is a church alive in Christ together! So I say this out of my heart: I love Pennsylvania! I love the Susquehanna Conference!

You will hear more about this today and tomorrow, but please know that your Bishop and Cabinet have a renewed sense of excitement to share with you a refined expression of what our mission is as an annual conference.

You need to remember three words about the mission of our conference:

Grow! Equip! Connect!

The mission of Susquehanna Conference is to:

grow spiritual transformational leaders,

equip vital congregations and create new places for new people, and

connect with each other and the world

so that (now the vision of our conference comes)

Alive in Christ together, the Susquehanna Conference will embody the beloved community of disciple making congregations.

That's who we are and what we are about!

The beloved community is a window for the world to see what the reign of God is like where all live in peace and justice and harmony. It's the vision of the shalom of God. The prophets envisioned it. Martin Luther King, Jr. described it. Jesus proclaimed, taught, lived, died, and was resurrected for it.

The Cabinet and I will do our best to communicate the conference mission with clarity and implement it with clear goals in mind. Accordingly, we will continue to explore the ways to align our resources and structure with this understanding of our mission and vision. The Cabinet and I are enthused as we imagine and envision what this mission-driven focus of the conference will help our churches accomplish.

Thanks and praises be to God that we have many thriving churches, highly vital congregations, and effective leaders among us. But we realize that many of our churches are either barely maintaining or declining, some of them at a rapid pace. Under an unfavorable cultural environment for the church, we are continuously losing worship attenders or new members, and we are confirming fewer new disciples. The rate of decline seems to be accelerating, causing some significant concerns regarding human, financial, and programmatic resources for ministry. Our future journey will be very challenging.

Besides, we as a local church and as an annual conference, are not immune to the potential impact that may come from the uncertainty of our current denominational situation regarding the question of human sexuality. The unity of our church is at stake.

When people on both sides of the matter are so passionate and resolved in their position, there seems to be no good or right way forward for all. A certain way forward may please some, but dissatisfy others, causing disillusion and even anger. Whatever I say here today for the sake of a way forward in unity may gratify some and disappoint others. It's like doomed to say, and doomed not to say. However, in the midst of uncertainty, with many unanswered questions and no easy way forward in sight, I continue to feel God calling me to lead the church to unity as best as I can.

Knowing that the unity of our church is under serious threat, but also recognizing that unity is Jesus' ardent prayer and aspiration for his followers, we started our quadrennial journey last year as a conference with the theme of unity: "**Better Together: Make Us One.**" Today we gather once again as the Susquehanna Annual Conference in the spirit of unity under the theme: "**Better Together: One With Christ.**"

Jesus' prayer in John 17 will continue to be our biblical foundation for unity.

Unity is a biblical mandate for the Body of Christ. However, we realize that unity is a challenging agenda for the church. The fact of the matter is that unity doesn't have a chance until we acknowledge that "our way or the highway" is not a way at all, and that breakthroughs can only be made when we are willing and ready to create room for others. It means a change of heart on our part.

Hear me clearly, changing our hearts does not mean to change our core values, beliefs, and convictions or compromising our conscience. It means changing from a heart at war to a heart at peace.

A heart at war sees the other side as an object to overcome. It does not recognize that the other side has as many rights, privileges, and validity as it does. It leaves no room for the other side.

A heart at peace sees the other side as a person who deserves to be of equal worth. It allows the other side to have a space and thus seeks coexistence without demanding or requiring my way or no way at all.

But we know that changing a heart is the most challenging agenda of all, particularly when it comes to examining if our own heart needs to change, let alone changing another person's heart. Changing our heart is beyond what we can do by ourselves. It's what the Holy Spirit does. So we have to depend on prayer. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord.

One of the most intriguing and helpful insights for unity comes from A. W. Tozer. Let me quote Tozer's words: "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by

being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow.” His point? Seek first to be one with Christ then unity will follow.

What Tozer said connected me to the Colossians’ passage known as “the Supremacy of Christ.” Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines “supreme” as “highest in rank or authority” or “highest in degree or quality.” In essence, there is none better. The supreme of something is its ultimate. So what is the supremacy of Christ and what are its implications? What do these words evoke? What happens inside of you when you hear them?

One of the Cabinet members shared with us this quote about the supremacy of Christ from Sam Storms: “Jesus Christ is the reason, the goal, the aim, the intent, the point, the purpose, the end, the terminus, the consummation and culmination of every molecule that moves.”

And he added, “For me, the supremacy of Christ is a powerful reminder that:

Christ is before all, as in him all things were created.

Christ is for all, in that he died for us while we were yet sinners, proving God’s love toward us.

Christ is over all, in that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord.

Christ is after all, the One who is Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

Lived out, it means that Jesus Christ is not just the means by which we find our life. He is our life.”

The point of the supremacy of Christ can be expressed in many other words. Simply put: Jesus Christ is the One. Or It's about Jesus Christ. Whatever we are to be and are to do as disciples, God's people, the Church, Jesus Christ is our ultimate reason and purpose. It's about Jesus Christ. We do not seek unity for the sake of unity. The unity we seek is about Jesus Christ. Unity without Christ, unity outside of Christ, unity that has little or nothing to do with Christ is not the unity we seek. The unity of the Body of Christ is unity with Christ, of Christ, for Christ, and in Christ. It's about Jesus Christ.

Tozer's metaphor of the tuning fork for unity comes alive when we realize that Jesus Christ is supreme of all, meaning that He is the primary, standard, and ultimate tuning fork for all of us to tune ourselves to. How do we tune ourselves to the tuning fork of Christ? How do we measure ourselves to the standard of Jesus Christ?

You will hear this afternoon from an authority in the tuning business saying that, "As different as each piano may be, when you tune them all to the same pitch, they are all in tune with one another." The point is to hear Jesus' pitch.

Let me suggest a couple of pitches from Jesus:

(1) First, let's hear the pitch of His attitude.

This Colossian passage of "the Supremacy of Christ" is the highlight of Paul's Christology. He makes it very clear that Jesus Christ is the ultimate in power, glory, authority, and significance in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, before creation and after creation. Indeed, this passage puts Jesus Christ in the highest place above all whatsoever. Jesus Christ is the supreme.

At the same time, Paul includes in this passage the lowest place that Jesus was in. "For God was pleased to have all God's fullness in him to reconcile to himself all things,

whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” In Jesus Christ, the highest is connected to the lowest.

A similar passage is found in Philippians 2. It also tells us the supremacy of Christ: “God exalted him in the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9-11) But the same passage starts with these words: “Have the same mind or attitude that was in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5) The same words hung in a picture frame on the wall in the small study room of my father. Those who visited my office have seen it hanging on the wall.

Then the passage continues, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equally with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and become obedient to death—even death on the cross.” (Philippians 2:6-8) Then it says, “Therefore, God exalted him in the highest place.” (Philippians 2:9a) Both passages are essentially saying the same things: The supremacy of Christ. However, this supreme Christ is also the One who became nothing for the redemption of the world.

The Philippian passage gives us the most convincing clue to what’s in Jesus’ mind: **humility**. That’s the most compelling pitch for us to hear to tune our attitude with the tuning fork of Christ. The theological framework that the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops shared includes a section titled “A convicted humility.” Let me quote a few lines from it. “We pray the exaggeration of our differences will not divide us.

We also recognize and affirm that as United Methodists we hold in common many more fundamental theological commitments, commitments which bind us together despite our real differences. These also have implications for how we understand and express our disagreements, and for what we do about them. Therefore, we seek to advocate a stance we have called convicted humility. This is an attitude which combines honesty about the differing convictions which divide us with humility about the way in which each of our views may stand in need of corrections. It also involves humble repentance for all the ways in which we have spoken and acted as those seeking to win a fight rather than those called to discern the shape of faithfulness together....”

I so deeply appreciate John Wesley’s attitude when it comes to difficult and divisive subjects. He would say, “This is what I believe. But I may be wrong. It will be fully known when we all get to heaven.” That’s the attitude in tune with Jesus’ pitch of humility. Let’s listen to the tuning fork of Christ. Do we hear Jesus’ pitch of humility?

(2) Second, let’s hear the pitch of Jesus’ heart.

One of the uplifting moments that the world watched recently was the wedding between Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. It was celebrated as the wedding of the year. The news media showed many fairy tale story like elements of the wedding. It also reported some ground-breaking moments in the royal wedding tradition that is hundreds of years old. Among them was the preaching of Bishop Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. It was a delightful delivery of a sermon for the occasion from the African-American tradition. The message was altogether profound, compelling, and transformative.

Quoting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he said, “We must discover the power of love, the redemptive power of love, and when we do that we will make of this old world a new world....” And he invited the audience to imagine a world where love is the way. “Imagine this tired old world when love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive.... When love is the way, there’s plenty good room for all of God’s children. Because when love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all and we are brothers and sisters, children of God. My brothers and sisters, that’s a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family,” he said. Indeed, he preached that there’s wonder working power in love. As I read his sermon in the New York Times and saw the words, “power of love” repeated again and again, I found myself singing, “There’s power, power, wonder working power in the blood of the lamb. There’s power, power, wonder working power in the precious blood of the lamb.”

If we look into His heart, what do we see? **Love!** There’s nothing else but love in His heart. Overflowing love. Do we hear Jesus’ pitch of love?

I would like you to hear the soul provoking point that Bishop Curry made. He spoke about the insight of French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a priest, scientist, scholar, and mystic. He said that fire was one of the greatest discoveries in all of human history. And he then went on to say that if humanity ever harnesses the energy of fire again, if humanity ever captures the energy of love, it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire.”

God’s people, the world has already discovered fire the second time. It’s the love of God in Jesus Christ! Proven on the cross, the love of God flows from Jesus’

heart. It's the wonder working power for redemption, salvation, and the transformation of the world. The pitches from Jesus' mind and heart are crystal clear: **Humility and Love**.

God's people, unity is a big deal in the eyes of God. Please hear Jesus' prayer in John 17 carefully: "May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:23) The unity or disunity of Jesus' followers seen by the world makes a difference in making Jesus Christ and the love of God known to the world. As far as who Jesus Christ is and the love of God are concerned, the unity or disunity of those proclaiming they believe may make it or break it in the eyes of the world. The unity of Jesus' people lets the world know that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." (John 3:16-17) Our disunity puts the gospel in jeopardy! The Gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake! Unity is about Jesus Christ. Humility and love will do it.

As I journey through the denominational struggle over human sexuality and its impact on the agenda of unity, one of the questions that I wrestle with is this one: "Why do so faithful, committed, devoted, honest, honorable and authentic disciples of Jesus Christ differ from one another so radically?" They love Jesus. What am I missing? Are we disciples of a different Jesus? Did we received a different baptism and were we confirmed to a different faith? Do we worship and serve a different God? If not, what makes us so compelled and willing to go a different way from one another?

There was a missionary in a foreign land and one day a boy came to him and gave him a gift. "This is for you," the boy said to him. It was a beautiful, gorgeous shell. The

missionary was delighted to receive it, but was really surprised, because the ocean was far away. "This is so beautiful! I love it. Thanks so much." And he asked, "Where did you get it?" "From the beach," the boy said. "Beach? It's so far away. It must have been a long walk," the missionary said. The boy said, "The walk is a part of the gift."

Our walk includes wrestling with questions and doubts, and struggling with confusion and uncertainties. That's OK. Our walk is a part of the gift.

I don't know what is waiting for us and our beloved church. But I know who's holding the future, the One who came from the highest place to prove God's love for us on the cross, the lowest place. There's nothing whatsoever that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. This Jesus walks with us. So God's people, take heart. This Jesus will never ever let us go. Amen and Amen!