

Transcript of Sermon - The Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde
January 21, 2025 | Washington National Cathedral

Again, my warm welcome to all who have gathered in this house of prayer, for all people, and for those who are joining us via livestream. As a country, we have gathered this morning to pray for unity as a people, and a nation. Not for agreement, political or otherwise, but for the kind of unity that fosters community across diversity and division. A unity that serves the common good. Unity in this sense is a threshold requirement for people to live in Freedom, and together in a free society - it is the solid rock, as Jesus said, upon which to build a nation.

It is not conformity, it is not victory, it is not polite weariness or passivity born of exhaustion. Unity is not partisan. Rather, unity is a way of being with one another, that it encompasses and respects our differences that teaches us to hold different perspectives and life experiences as valid and worthy of respect, that enables us - in our communities and in the halls of power - to genuinely care for one another even when we disagree. Those across our country who dedicate their lives, or who volunteer, to help others in times of natural disaster often at great risk to themselves, never asked those they are helping for whom they voted in a past election or what positions they hold on a particular issue, and we are at our best when we follow their example.

For unity, at times, is sacrificial, in the way that love is sacrificial. A giving of ourselves for the sake of another. In his sermon on the mount, Jesus of Nazareth exhorts us to love, not only our neighbors, but to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, to be merciful as our God is merciful, to forgive others as God forgives us. And Jesus went out of his way to welcome those whom his society deemed as outcasts.

Now I grant you that unity in this broad expansive sense is aspirational, and it's a lot to pray for - it's a big ask of our God, worthy of the best of who we are and who we can be. But there isn't much to be gained by our prayers if we act in ways that further deepen the divisions among us. Our scriptures are quite clear about this, that God is never impressed by prayers when actions are not informed by them, nor does God spare us from the consequences of our deeds which always, in the end, matter more than the words we pray.

Those of us gathered here in the Cathedral, we are not naive about the realities of politics. When power and wealth and competing interests are at stake, when views of what America should be are in conflict, when there are strong opinions across a spectrum of possibilities and starkly different understandings of what the right course of action is. There will be winners and losers when votes are cast, decisions made that set the course of public policy, and the prioritization of resources. It goes without saying that in a Democracy, not everyone's particular hopes and dreams can be realized in a given legislative session or

a Presidential term, not even in a generation. Which is to say not everyone's specific prayers, for those of us who are people of prayer, not everyone's prayers will be answered in the way we would like, but for some the loss of their hopes and dreams will be far more than political defeat but a loss of equality and dignity, and their livelihoods.

Given this, then, is true unity among us even possible, and why should we care about it? Well, I hope we care. I hope we care because the culture of contempt that has become normalized in this country threatens to destroy us. We are all bombarded daily with messages from what sociologists now call "The Outrage Industrial Complex", some of that driven by external forces whose interests are furthered by a polarized America. Contempt fuels political campaigns and social media, and many profit from that, but it's a worrisome, it's a dangerous way to lead a country.

I'm a person of faith surrounded by people of faith, and with God's help I believe that unity in this country is possible. Not perfectly, for we are imperfect people and an imperfect union, but sufficient enough to keep us all believing in and working to realize the ideals of the United States of America, ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence with its assertion of innate human equality and dignity, and we are right to pray for God's help as we seek unity, and we need God's help. But only if we ourselves are willing to tend to the foundations on which unity depends. Like Jesus' analogy of building a house of faith on the rock of this teaching as opposed to building a house on sand. The foundations we need for unity must be sturdy enough to withstand the many storms that threaten it.

So what they: the foundations of unity? Drawing from our sacred traditions and texts, let me suggest that there are at least three. The first foundation for unity is honoring the inherent dignity of every human being, which is - as all the faiths represented here affirm - the birthright of all people as children of our one God. In public discourse honoring each other's dignity means refusing to mock or discount or demonize those with whom we differ choosing instead to respectfully debate our differences and whenever, possible seek, common ground; and if common ground is not possible dignity demands we remain true to our convictions without contempt for those who hold convictions of their own.

The second foundation for unity is honesty, in both private conversation and public discourse. If we're not willing to be honest, there is no use in praying for unity because the actions work against the prayers themselves. We might, for a time, experience a false sense of unity among some, but not the sturdier, broader unity that we need to address the challenges that we face. Now, to be fair, we don't always know where the truth lies and there's a lot working against the truth now, but when we do know - when we know what is true - it is incumbent upon us to speak the truth even when, especially when, it costs us. The third and last foundation I'll mention today is: foundation for unity is humility, which we all need because we are all fallible human beings. We make mistakes, we say and do

things that we later regret, we have our blind spots and our biases, and perhaps we are most dangerous to ourselves and others when we are persuaded without a doubt that we are absolutely right and someone else is absolutely wrong, because then we are just a few steps from labeling ourselves as “the good people” vs. “the bad people”. And the truth is that we’re all people; we’re both capable of Good and Bad.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn once astutely observed that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between classes, nor between political parties, but right through every human heart - through all human hearts. And the more we realize this the more room we have within ourselves for humility and openness to one another across our differences because, in fact, we are more like one another than we realize and we need each other.

Unity is relatively easy to pray for on occasions of great solemnity. It's a lot harder to realize when we're dealing with real differences in our private lives and in the public arena. But without unity we're building our nation's house on sand, and with a commitment to unity that incorporates diversity and transcends disagreement and with the solid foundations of dignity, honesty, and humility that such unity requires, we can do our part and in our time to realize the ideals and dreams of America.

Let me make one final plea, Mr. President. Millions have put their trust in you and, as you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a Loving God. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian, and transgender children in Democratic, Republican, and Independent families, some who fear for their lives. And the people - the people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings; who labor in poultry farms and meat packing plants; who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shifts in hospitals, they - they may not be citizens or have the proper documentation. But the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches and mosques, synagogues, vihara, and temples. I ask you to have mercy, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing War zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here. Our God teaches us that we are to be merciful to the stranger for we were all once strangers in this land. May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth to one another in love, and walk humbly with each other and our God. For the good of all people - good of all people in this nation and the world. Amen.