This sermon was preached at the “Ecumenical Service of Prayer for Christian Unity” at Our Lady of Hope Roman Catholic Church, Copake Falls, New York by Fr. W. Walton Zelley, Jr., Associate, St. John in the Wilderness Episcopal Church, Copake Falls, New York, on Wednesday evening, January 22, 2014.

In the middle of the 60’s, I served as Vicar of St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church in the Kansas City suburb of Olathe. One of the favorite stories circulating in Kansas clerical circles at the time concerned a young, ambitious, and energetic clergyman who had become the pastor of a church of the Disciples of Christ denomination which usually identified itself on its signboards as “The Christian Church” (as in the First Christian Church of Olathe, Kansas).

Well, the young pastor I just referred to, determined by hook or by crook to build up his diminishing congregation, decided to do a door-to-door canvas of his small Kansas town, seeking to attract some new members to his church, with mixed results. He was greeted at one doorway by an old, grizzled Kansan, who responded to the young pastor’s invitation that, if he did not already have a church home, to join the pastor’s congregation at the First Christian Church by saying with passion: “Listen here Reverend, I was born an Episcopalian, I was baptized an Episcopalian, and I intend to be buried an Episcopalian. Reverend, no one is going to make a Christian out of me!”

The denominations in this country, of which there are many, are entering into a period in which we are finally asking the question, “Now that we’ve been Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans, Reformed, Roman Catholic, or the hundreds upon hundreds of other denominations whose churches have dotted the landscape of this country, for centuries upon centuries, is it too late to make Christians out of us as well? The churches, in other words, are facing an identity crisis. We are discovering that it is not enough to identify ourselves with a denominational label. The world at large will have none of that anymore. The question is no longer, “Why should I be an Episcopalian rather than a Roman Catholic, or a Lutheran, or a Reformed rather than a Methodist.” Rather the question is, “Why should I be a Christian at all?”

Fr. Michael Marshall, the dynamic young Vicar of All Saints’ Anglican Church, Margaret Street, in London, one of the few churches in England where it’s still hard to find an empty pew at a Sunday service, paints a very vivid picture of the contemporary church by calling attention to a cartoon, which once appeared in the New Yorker Magazine. In this rather macabre cartoon, a skeleton is pictured collapsed upon the front doorstep of a gloomy stone mansion, his bony index finger still affixed in a state of perpetual rigor mortis upon the doorbell. Around his neck hangs a small sign, which reads, “Please help me! I am blind!” But over the doorbell another sign is affixed on a small bronze plaque. It reads, “Home for the deaf.”

There’s the church’s encounter with the world as I see it right now in a nutshell. An agonized humanity blinded by a distorted emphasis on acquiring things, things, and more things; blinded by a crippling fear of the rapid and yet inexorable social upheaval of our time; blinded by the brutalism of the human spirit expressed in our environment in questionable foreign crusades; and, years and years of inhumanity to those who have committed the major crime of being born black in this country, or having come to this land from countries south if our border, as they have fled the stultifying poverty of their native lands; blinded by the hollowness of the human heart which remains after we have whored after the pseudo-religions of astrology, drugs, and shallow, uncommitted sexuality. This agonized, blinded humanity presses at the doors of our churches seeking a response, seeking an answer, seeking an invitation to enter, seeking to be fed, to be welcomed, to be reassured, and to be helped. And yet our churches too often remain simply homes for the deaf.
We are experiencing in our day what many have called the period of “ecumenical thaw.” Christians throughout the world are rejoicing in day-by-day evidences of unparallel co-operation and harmony among the various segments of the sadly fragmented Body of Christ. But what about the world outside the church? What about the growing numbers of people in this country, who, in answer to the census question about religious affiliation, respond “none!” What do they think about the issues, which continue to divide the Christian Church? I wonder if the late maverick Southern Baptist preacher and theologian, Carlyle Marney, might have been on to something when he observed in a conference I attended, “I wonder if it might be presumptuous in posing the suggestion that it might just be real difficult for the vast majority of the people in this country and abroad to avoid stifling a hearty yawn even if all of us Christians did manage to get together. I sometimes wonder,” he continued, “if the Good Lord should not go ahead and squash down the whole denominational mess and start all over again.” I think that Dr. Marney is probably correct in his suspicion that the issues that divide the Body of Christ and seem such big deals to many of us within the churches, simply bore the living daylights out of those outside them, and more and more of us who remain within them as well.

This is especially true, religious sociologists tell us, among the young adults in our nation and in the world. In the most recent decades, church attendance in terms of percentage of population, has been on an un-fluctuating down hill curve. And it’s those adults between the ages of 21 and 35 who are primarily responsible for this decline. Young people demonstrate a deep interest in spiritual issues (witness the unparallel enrollment in college religion courses, and the great interest in so-called “New Age” religious expressions). They are the ones who are likely to say, “I am spiritual, but I’m not religious.” But when they say “I’m not religious,” what they usually mean is that they have been turned off by the institutional church in all its manifestations. When these young adults discover that I am a priest, they delight in informing me that they are disillusioned by “organized religion.” I delight in responding back to them that in the almost 50 years I’ve been a priest, what I’ve mostly experienced is disorganized religion, but that I do understand what they are saying. These young adults who have no religious upbringing at all, or who are members of what I like to call “the church alumni association,” are no longer asking, “Why should I be an Episcopalian rather than a Methodist or a Lutheran, or a Reformed rather than being a Roman Catholic?” Now they are asking, “Why should I be a Christian at all?”

The paradox is that while many of these young adults have gotten turned off by the church, they, at the same time have frequently gotten turned on by the Bible. And they have discovered that leaping our from every page of God’s Holy Word are stirring calls to the service of humanity: calls to love; calls to sacrifice; calls to tolerance and understanding; calls to inclusiveness; calls to a veritable revolution of the Holy Spirit transforming the hearts of those who would be Jesus’ disciples. And yet, what do they see in the churches? Debates about liturgy; debates about church financing; debates about competing forms of church government; debates about whose in and whose out in the Christian community; debates about who I can love and still be a Christian. And a suffering world cries out to us; “How dare you spend even 10 seconds debating these things while claiming to be a disciple of Jesus who taught us as he washed the feet of his disciples.” Jesus said, “A new commandment I give unto you, that you love others as I have loved you. And in another place he reminded us that the two commandments to “love God and love our neighbor” are to be found in the foundation on which the Church, by Jesus’ intention, should always be built.

Might it be that the Holy Spirit might have been engaging in our day what Dr. Marney refereed to as a little “mashing down,” reducing us to the status of a church in exile; an oppressed and beleaguered minority stripped of our delusions of grandeur; our pomp and our circumstances; stripped of
our dependence on shallow orthodoxies; fighting for our very survival in an increasingly secularist world.

But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran Bishop martyred by the Nazis, once put it so well in his Letters from Prison before his execution: “The way the church maintains her own survival is by fighting, not for it, but for the salvation of the world.” So the questions which each of us must ask ourselves, no matter what our denominational label might be, is: “What should unite us a Christ’s Body in the world today? What does it mean to be a ‘Servant Church’ to a hurting world? What does it mean to be agents of reconciliation in a fragmented and war torn world? What does it mean to others when we call ourselves Christians today?” As someone once said about marriage, the important thing about being truly “one” in marriage is not that we see everything the same way, but that we are always looking together in the same direction. And the same, I would suggest, is true for the church.

We have gathered together in this sanctuary this evening as one Body sharing “one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all.” We have listened to God’s word proclaimed, so that the Word may become flesh in our hearts and minds as it did in Bethlehem of old. Soon, we will be affirming our faith and trust in God who makes all things new. Then we will join praying for each other, and all the peoples of the earth, knowing that becoming a new creation in Christ is not something we do in splendid isolation, but rather is something we do in the midst of a supportive community of believers who have dedicated themselves to being as open as they can be to the transforming power of God’s unconditional love. Then we will join in symbolizing the care we have for each other and for all God’s children as we exchange the sign of Christ’s peace, committing ourselves to each other as Jesus first gave up his life for us.

As Christian men and women we are constituted by our worship, because everything we do as Christians is meant to express in our everyday lives what we have expressed in the words and actions of our worship. Listening to God’s word, putting our trust in God and his Love, showing an active concern and care for our hurting brothers and sisters in the world, offering ourselves, our souls and bodies to Jesus that he may form us and make us new creations in him; going forth into the world rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, sharing God’s divine life and love incarnate in Jesus with others. This is what we are called to be unified about in the Christian community. This is where Christian unity begins, and this is where it ends. Merger gimmicks won’t do it; compromises won’t do it; rearranging church furniture won’t do it (someone once likened that futile attempt to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic). For what a suffering world hungered for and what a hoping world looks for from us who dare to call ourselves Christians, is “neither circumcision nor un-circumcision, but a new creation,” as God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, continues to make Christians out of all of us.