

## Difficult Conversations and Decisions

### Keynote Address

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Jan Love  
Dean and Professor of Religion and World Politics  
Candler School of Theology, Emory University

As requested by Tom Porter, I will be speaking in part about some of my experiences with the World Council of Churches where I represented the United Methodist Church in one capacity or another for over 30 years. My association ended in 2006, however, and I am not very current on most matters related to the WCC. I am delighted that someone else in the room is, however, and she is Bishop Sally Dyck.

I have spent a lifetime wading into some of the most deeply entrenched divisions we humans experience. Inside and outside the church, I have devoted lots of time and energy to address, for example, matters of racial justice, the elimination of poverty, peace in homes and neighborhoods here and around the world, equality for women and men, interfaith relations, and healing deep divisions across churches.

This is not easy work, but it is deeply rewarding and ultimately joy-filled. My engagement in these efforts stems in part from having been a victim of violence several times in my life and being rescued each time from despair, hatred, rage, and the deep desire for retaliation by my family and friends – Christians and others -- who surrounded me with love, grace, righteous anger, healing space, and hope. I speak this morning as a Christian, which I know in an interfaith group may seem somewhat limited. I hope that whatever insights I might have will find echoes in the other religious traditions represented in the group. As others this weekend have pointed out so eloquently, for those of us determined to unite – in the best of the Wesleyan tradition - personal holiness with social holiness, one of the great challenges we face is this: How as the body of Christ, can we remain true to our calling as passionate advocates for justice and peace -- thus causing conflict -- while not gunning down, running roughshod over, or even denigrating our opponents?

Our ready willingness as Christians to wage war with and perpetrate injustice against each other is a shameful counter witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, a horrific betrayal of the fullness of love, grace, and mercy we claim as the body of Christ. What does it mean to exercise our passion for a righteous cause while honoring the Christ in others who deeply disagree with us, who stand in our way and become our adversaries? I believe that we will never end our profound compromise with violence, without tackling

this one head on. The curriculum that JustPeace produces and the work that Tom Porter, Stephanie Hixon and others do invite us to engage conflict well. Many of you have produced similar curriculum, programs or other engaged work that strives to move us in the same direction.

In this context, I want to probe the issue of difficult conversations and decision making. My hope is to point a way beyond tolerance and beyond offense for ourselves and our students.

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Serving in one capacity or another in the World Council of Churches for 30 years brought many privileges and blessings, one of them being the chance to hear the tales told about Christian leaders from all over the world. The WCC consists of about 340 Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostal, and Old Catholic churches from over 100 countries, which means that there's lots of room for story-telling, some of it flattering, some not. These churches come together to find unity across the whole of the Christian family and the whole of humanity, a daunting task that we call ecumenism.

An apocryphal story from the WCC is about a famous Methodist from Britain named Pauline Webb. Pauline came to the WCC as a lay leader. Professionally, she worked for many years as a religion news reporter and commentator on the British Broadcasting Corporation. The WCC was founded in 1948 and appointed its first female officer, Pauline, in 1968. She served as vice-chair of the Council. Pauline was most noted for her deep passion about and long engagement in efforts to achieve racial justice. She played a pivotal role in the WCC work to end apartheid in South Africa, for example, long before the cause became popular. I first met her when I began working with the Council in 1975.

The story about her goes like this. Near the end of her term, the Executive Committee engaged in a contentious debate over some controversial issue. The executive committee is only 25 people, and members get to know each other fairly well. Pauline had a strong opinion about the matter under consideration and spoke up at one point very assertively and passionately. A Romanian Orthodox bishop, Metropolitan Antony from Transylvania, held a very different point of view and was clearly quite disturbed by what Pauline said. He turned to her and declared with passion at least as forceful as hers, "Now you have really offended me!" Pauline paused for a few seconds of silence and then replied with her usual dry wit, "Well, bishop, that's very interesting. You've been offending me for years!"

Ecumenism, or the quest for Christian unity, is as much a process as it is a product. My own practical definition of this sometimes painful process is dialogue despite the offense. Sometimes we may not realize the depth of our differences as Christians or even as humans until we have offended one another. These offenses are most often not at all intentional. Sometimes they even come as a big surprise, and they may occur – often do occur - as a consequence of fully revealing who we are as we seek

to embody our faith. On the occasions when we offend each other deeply, it is extremely difficult to remain engaged across starkly contrasting perspectives.

At other times, the opposite happens. In hopes of offending no one, we lose courage. We fail to reveal ourselves in our full and authentic understanding of the Christian faith because we know that who we are and what we stand for, in all good conscience, is offensive to someone else's full, authentic self-understanding of God's revelation. I call this polite parallelism. In polite parallelism, we come together in a kind of co-existence that can enhance familiarity and fellowship. It can even aid understanding of different styles of work and worship. But if we are functioning as polite parallels we never touch our deepest passions and possibilities or the issues we find most vexing and difficult. Therefore, we cannot offer each other our best challenge or deepest comfort, the great riches of our faith, or the creative energy in jointly solving problems. Instead we settle for tolerance, which is not bad, but it adds up to a polite avoidance of the hard work of embodying the belief that the church of Jesus Christ is indeed one. If we never experience each other's challenge and, at times, even each other's rage, we will never learn to be a part of the same household, living in genuine community, delighting and rejoicing in our diversity while finding our common convictions and healing our divisions. We will leave everyone with the picture of Christians that I think I heard Marc Gopin articulate yesterday, if I heard him correctly, that it seems to most observers that nothing binds us together as Christians. Our differences are so vast that there's no substantial reason to think that we all belong to the same religion. I understand that perspective and comprehend fully why anyone would come to that conclusion. But as a Christian, I find it completely unacceptable.

But, as has been said several times in the last two days, in many places there's little polite parallelism or tolerance to be found. The polarization we feel in our churches, in our society and across our world is very real. We and others across the world live in an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. We are at war. Thousands of people are getting killed in combat zones, not only in the scores of places where the United States has deployed troops but also in many other war-torn areas of the world. We don't reserve the violence just for strangers abroad. We bring it into our cities, our neighborhoods, our homes and our churches. At times, our beloved United Methodist Church, like other denominations, feels like a war zone.

While the polarization we experience in our churches, in our society and across our world is real, ironically, so is our longing to live in community with one another. Most of us yearn to redeem the brokenness we experience as individuals, families, communities, nations and as churches. Most of us long for the fulfillment of the biblical vision of shalom where all women and men, all children and youth will have their fullness of humanity restored.

One of my favorite artists is Brian Andreas, a cartoonist, who paints beautiful pictures. One of his cartoons about peace portrays some wonderfully weird-looking creatures dancing in a circle. The caption reads, "I don't think of it as working for world peace...I think of it as just trying to get along in a really big strange family."

The United Methodist Church and many other denominations are a really big strange family, a wonderful, fascinating family. Several years ago at an ecumenical gathering over lunch, a Quaker asked me to describe our denomination. I told him about some of our demographics and members. For example, most counties across the United States contain a United Methodist Church, and this makes us geographically the most diverse church in the country. With our rich array of members from various races and ethnicities, we are one of the most diverse denominations in this arena, too. My Quaker friend was surprised to learn how large and multidimensional we are, but he was absolutely shocked when I told him of our political diversity. We are the church of Hillary Clinton, Dick and Lynn Cheney, George and Laura Bush, John Edwards, Elizabeth Edwards, Andrew Card, George McGovern, Jocelyn Elders and many other prominent leaders. These political variations reflect theological diversity, too.

These significant differences in our church sometimes get propelled into deeply destructive conflict, just like the conflict that beset the church in Corinth to which Paul wrote his letters. In I Corinthians chapter 12, Paul talks about many gifts but one spirit, many members but one body, and a number of roles in the church, but one church. Paul uses the human body as a metaphor to describe the church as the body of Christ in which all are members but with various functions. Ideally, all work together for the common good. The parts of the body that seem the weakest are often the most indispensable (12:12-31). Paul's descriptions of the body seem almost humorous in their approach to conflict. First he makes clear that we cannot absent ourselves from the body of Christ.

Beginning in verse 15, he says,

If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?...

Having declared that we cannot simply opt out of this body when we don't like how it's working, Paul then goes on to say that we cannot dispense with any member either. Beginning in verses 21, he says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

"Houston, we have a problem." Diversity and various gifts among the people of God are inherent parts of the church, thanks be to God! But when that diversity and variety turns into divisions, invidious and menacing differences, and downright animosity, even open hostility, according to Paul, we can't just say about ourselves that I don't belong here. Let me out! We cannot opt out just because we don't like the diversity and the differences. Furthermore, we cannot say to someone else, you have to leave! We can't kick anyone out of the body of Christ!

Oh, dear. If we're not allowed to leave and we're not allowed to kick anybody out, what in the world are we going to do? In writing to Corinth, Paul is acting absolutely un-American here. Our typical cultural pattern in the United States, both inside and outside the church, is that when we don't like where we are and the people with whom we find ourselves, we either pick up and leave or kick somebody else out. But Paul says no. Not in the body of Christ you don't. You're not in charge here.

So what do we do? Well as you know, chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians gives way to chapter 13, Paul's ode to love. According to Paul, the best way to unity is not through any of the various and diverse gifts, but through self-giving love. This is one of the most beautiful chapters in the Bible. Let me remind us again of its beauty.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. <sup>8</sup> Love never ends.

We hear this chapter in weddings all the time, and we often associate it with romantic love. Now I'm a big fan of romantic love. I'm all for it, and I very much enjoy hearing this chapter at weddings. I think it provides for some sober moments in the midst of all the joy and celebration. But Paul is not addressing this letter to a couple getting married. He's addressing it to a congregation, a church council if you will, maybe in United Methodist lingo, an annual conference, even a General Conference.

So let's say we learn to love and we succeed. Let's assume that we work hard at love, that we remove the pettiness, the power games, and the personality conflicts; let's say that we hold humane, not underhanded campaigns for political office in the church; let's assume we get mature and loving enough to get beyond all these distractions and distortions of our community together. Will then our conflicts within the church, this precious body of Christ, be finished? Will we find ourselves in a new profound state of peace? We will we then make an authentic and united witness to the world?

Well, you know the answer to this one. You know that within the Christian family my deepest, most authentic self-understandings of Christ's revelation in my life may well offend your deepest, most authentic self-understanding of Christ's revelation in your life. Like the WCC story of Pauline Webb and the Metropolitan Antony, we may be doing our best and acting in the most loving way we know how, and we still offend, or perhaps in the worst case, enrage each other.

When this happens, what do we do? Do we retreat to the polite parallelism that I described earlier where we simply tolerate our differences? Well, that's not bad. Polite parallelism, or polite tolerance works a lot better than open warfare. But for the body of Christ, it's not good enough. Christ calls us to a unity so large, a love so expansive, a mutual encounter so earthshaking that we rediscover our faith anew in the one who offends us most.

How do we find the face of Christ in another Christian with whom we deeply disagree? How do we find the heart of Christ or the mind of Christ in another Christian whose basic beliefs run so counter to how we understand the Gospel that they enrage us?

From 2000-2004, I had the privilege within the United Methodist Church of co-chairing a denomination-wide Task Force on Homosexuality and the Unity of the Church. We worked to help those who, on the one hand, believe in the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in all aspects of the life of the church hold Christian conversation with those who, on the other hand, believe that the current official United Methodist policy, which claims that homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching and disallows the ordination of "practicing" homosexuals, reflects God's will for the church now and throughout the ages. We created space as safe as we could make it so that those who sit on opposite sides of this issue could tell their stories to each other.

This was hard work. At the beginning those who hold dear to the current policy didn't trust us, and those who want to change the policy simply didn't get the point. The ones who want to change the policy were the most recalcitrant in part because members of their group, e.g. gays and lesbians in the church, had the most to lose. Across days, weeks, months, and years of work, however, patience, respect and a search for mutual understanding stayed at the center of the effort that involved four key groups of decision making bodies in the life of the church, including the Council of Bishops. People whose faith perspective offends and even enrages each other, sat down and practiced the sacred art of listening to each other, searching for the light of Christ in the other's witness.

No one, as far as I know, changed their position on the issue of homosexuality, but that was not our goal – and this is where some of those who want to change the policy had the hardest time. The goal of the Task Force was not the same as that of advocates for change. The Task Force sought simply to have sincere believers with very different beliefs listen carefully to how others knew Christ. It was a strange, awkward, but good exercise and a giant leap of faith for most participants. Genuine, careful, heartfelt listening often is. Winston Churchill once said that "Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." A Cuban proverb states that "Listening looks easy, but it's not simple. Every head is a world." David Augsburger, a renowned Mennonite teacher, says that "Being listened to is so close to being loved that most people cannot tell the difference." Love, Paul tells the church in Corinth, is essential. We are nothing without love. Our work is nothing without love. Can we find a way to listen, really listen, to each other in love?

This work on the Task Force on Homosexuality and the Unity of the Church challenged me and gave me many blessings. My own most difficult encounters with Christians with whom I disagree, however, have been in other arenas. I want to tell you a story about my own struggle to listen in love, my own sense of rage at other Christians, and how it led me to help the WCC change its orientation to decision making within its governing bodies.

From 1999 to 2002, I served on a commission to try to heal divisions between Orthodox and Protestant churches in the World Council of Churches. It was called the Special Commission. The WCC had been the only place where all the Orthodox churches met each other, that is, the Russian, Greek, Romanian, Polish, Antiochian, Ethiopian, Syrian, and other orthodox churches all were members of the WCC. Ruptures and deep divisions surfaced between these Orthodox churches and Protestants in the WCC after the fall of communism in 1989 to 1991, particularly when Slavic Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe found themselves able to voice their faith perspectives in new ways. This was a moment of great liberation of Christian churches from communism that carried new challenges. In their new-found freedom Orthodox churches began expressing their differences with Protestant churches more vigorously than they ever had done before. Some threatened to leave the WCC.

In response, the Council established a 60 member Special Commission, half of which were Orthodox, half of which were Protestant, to address these issues. I was one of six women appointed to this 60-person commission. Because of the preponderance of Eastern Orthodox churches in Europe, half of the participants were from Europe. Therefore, unlike any other WCC group with which I had been associated, a council that draws on the talent of 340 member churches in over 100 countries, I found myself on a so-called global body dominated by European men. In our first meeting, Orthodox leaders stated that their basic disagreements with Protestant churches revolved around several issues, two of which were the ordination of women and the use of inclusive language. Furthermore, some who came representing monasteries encounter women so rarely that they could not bring themselves to greet me, much less have conversation with me.

This sounds shocking, and after having had productive relationships with Orthodox leaders in the WCC for more than 23 years, I experienced it as shocking. But for many Christian churches around the world, it is more normal than we would like to admit. The reality of our faith tradition is that most Christian churches around the world exclude women from full participation in their life and leadership. United Methodists and other mainline Protestant denominations are in a distinct minority on this one.

During the first meeting of the Special Commission, the more I heard, the more I felt completely out of place. I had felt uncomfortable on other occasions in my then 23 years of work the WCC but never before completely out of place. I was disturbed by the assertive, often angry, and occasionally condemnatory Orthodox pronouncements of convictions that ran counter to some of my most cherished beliefs. All polite parallelism evaporated during that first meeting, and the veneer of tolerance for the gifts and

perspectives of women, available from Orthodox leaders in early decades of my experience, was stripped away. As disturbing as these speeches were, however, I was absolutely enraged at the unwillingness of most of the male Protestant church leaders to defend their own churches' policies regarding women. In the face of assertive, often rancorous pronouncements against women by Orthodox leaders, most Protestant male leaders remained completely silent.

After the first meeting, I seriously contemplated resigning. Who needs this, I thought? Why should I sit in a room full of men and be repeatedly insulted as the Orthodox leaders refuse to acknowledge my experience and understanding of Christ to be as authentic as theirs, and the Protestant leaders act like cowards? I have other ways to give my time and talent to the church and to the cause of Christian unity! Surely even the church in Corinth, those whom Paul counseled to love each other, didn't experience divisions this deep!

I went to the second meeting for essentially selfish reasons. It was being held in Damascus, Syria, a place I had never been, and I wanted to see the country. I thought to myself, if the meetings get too insulting, I'll go out and be a tourist.

But during this second set of encounters, I began to realize that some of my Orthodox brothers were always remarkably silent during the sessions themselves. I began to seek these quiet ones out to talk during breaks or over meals. I wanted to find some sliver of hope that we might have something in common, something that drew us together in Christ. I shut out some of the angry speeches and the rude behavior in favor of listening for personal stories. Would it be possible to find the face of Christ in these men if I learned more about their particular witness?

Some of the stories were remarkable. One, for example, was told by a Polish Orthodox bishop about his experiences in prison during communism. While in prison he sought out other Christians and prayed fervently with Catholics, Protestants, or any other believers he could find. Prison erased all boundaries, he said. We needed the community of the faithful like never before. We couldn't afford to dwell on our differences. We had to take refuge in each other and our common convictions in Christ.

The transition to a more open society changed all that, he said. In a post communist system, when we're now all out of prison, we can't pray together anymore. We Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants in Poland must pray separately because our doctrinal differences are so deep, and we've forgotten how badly we need each other. We've lost that basic community we found in prison, and when we seek timidly to find it again, the conservatives in our churches attack us mercilessly.

This is only one of many stories I could tell you. The outcome of all our deliberations across three years in this commission is at best mixed. The meetings made some progress in the search for Christian unity, one of which is the move to consensus decision making, about which I will say more in a few minutes. But we also had some substantial setbacks. The point that I want to make, however, is that, in the midst of some



of the toughest recent encounters I've ever experienced with other Christians, I rediscovered that, if I searched long and hard enough, if I listened carefully enough, I could find the voice of Christ in someone who represented a tradition that offends me deeply. This is the kind of love I think Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 13. We didn't resolve our differences, but we found a new way of hearing about the other's encounter of and witness to Christ.

The more I work for justice, peace and Christian unity, the more I listen to others, even those with whom I will never fully agree, the more I learn about the wonders and mysteries of my own faith. Is this what Paul means in the last few verses of his famous ode to love? Is this what it means to see now through a mirror dimly? To know only in part? This kind of love attempts to move beyond tolerance and offense to engage deeply held differences. Such efforts should pervade the pedagogical culture, community life, and liturgical practices of every seminary so that our graduates can help heal our churches and the world.

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By the time I began serving on the Special Commission, I had chaired literally hundreds of meetings in the WCC, some addressing extremely contentious business. I always worked hard to enhance transparency and accountability in transacting business in governing bodies, and most decisions were carried by large majorities. Very few of the sessions over which I presided ever had really close votes. Those that did, however, were noteworthy, and across the decades, I and many others thought that the rules of order and debate, which were based on parliamentary procedures, sometimes got in the way. I played a key role in helping the primary governing body of the WCC, the Central Committee, move toward consensus as the primary style of decision making. This was one of the main recommendations of the Special Commission, the very group in which I had some of the toughest and a few quite tender experiences of my faith journey. Those very encounters, the really hard ones, convinced me to advocate for consensus.

Many people in church-related governing bodies want to find a better way of conducting business other than the routine parliamentary procedures that divide people into winners and losers. Wary that careful protections guaranteed by such rules and regulations will be lost, skeptics express their doubt that church and ecumenical organizations can improve much on a style that has been carefully refined across generations.

Despite my deep disappointments in the ways of Washington, DC, I have to acknowledge that Western parliaments represent one of the most significant and enduring expressions of democracy in human history. Yet, in contrast to the move toward secular democratic processes, widespread participation in decision-making, and openness to critical feedback do not characterize most ecclesiastical bodies across the globe. In many places, small church hierarchies often make pronouncements that the vast numbers of faithful are expected to swallow whole. For many, opening their churches up to parliamentary-style politics would represent an extraordinarily positive move toward a

democratic reformation that is long overdue. Skeptics, many of whom are my friends, appropriately asked, can the World Council of Churches improve on parliamentary procedures that have a significant history of success in both church and secular arenas?

The Uniting Church in Australia as well as Quakers in many countries provide various models of consensus decision making. Within the Special Commission some of their representatives made the case for consensus decision making in the WCC on theological as well as practical grounds. The Uniting Church in Australia shifted about fifteen years ago from parliamentary-style methods to consensus. Whether in a small group or an assembly of hundreds, members of the Uniting Church in Australia report that they find democracy to be enhanced considerably in the new procedures, a point the Orthodox church leaders found very appealing. Orthodox members of the Special Commission stated repeatedly that their goal in advocating consensus was primarily practical. They consider themselves to be a permanent minority and feel acutely the danger of being victimized by the tyranny of the Protestant and Anglican majority.

So, in principle, what does consensus mean for the World Council of Churches? As the *Minutes* of the September 2003 Central Committee meeting state, we agreed that the new decision making system would strive to:

be as simple as possible and only as complex as necessary; be transparent; enhance participation...across the whole group; check the possibility of domination by any participant or small group; manage with courtesy, respect and grace discussions where participants bring deeply held, contending perspectives on matters at the heart of their Christian convictions; provide orderly deliberations and timely decisions; explore creative alternatives; check the power of a few participants to obstruct decisions when the vast majority is ready to move; check the power of any moderator or chair to steer the deliberations in directions other than those desired by the body; and strengthen the capacity of the churches in fellowship in the WCC to engage in common witness and service.

In its new procedures, the World Council of Churches defines consensus as: “a process for seeking the common mind of a meeting without deciding issues by means of voting. A consensus is reached when one of the following occurs: (1) all are in agreement (unanimity); (2) most are in agreement and those who disagree are content that the discussion has been both full and fair and that the proposal expresses the general ‘mind of the meeting;’ the minority therefore gives consent; (3) the meeting acknowledges that there are various opinions, and it is agreed that these be recorded in the body of the proposal...; (4) it is agreed that the matter be postponed; (5) it is agreed that no decision can be reached. Therefore, consensus...allows any family or other group of churches...to have their objections to any proposal addressed and satisfied prior to the adoption of the proposal.”

A variety of techniques are spelled out in the new procedures to determine whether a body, even a group of 1000 delegates, is moving to consensus. Some safeguards for resorting to voting are included for the extreme cases when consensus

might fail. A small set of decisions, like the election of staff, must be made by voting, a provision included to acknowledge that the last three general secretaries were each elected with fairly close votes.

Historically, a popular term among Methodists has been Holy Conferencing. Consensus could facilitate this process, which I view in very practical terms. For me, holy conferencing strives to help everyone recognize the intimate bonds between ends and means. The manner through which we govern our life together in the church (and for that matter in a seminary) profoundly affects the quality of the fellowship we experience and seek together. The means by which we search for a common mind is as important as the decisions we reach. Process matters as much as product or outcome. In all arenas of our life together in the church, even in decision making arenas, we should seek to build each other up within the body of Christ, to listen carefully to one another's experiences, to intercede on each other's behalf, to speak clearly on common convictions as well as deeply held differences, and thus to grow in faith and in bonds of fellowship. A set of procedures that makes the best possible use of all members' abilities, experiences, commitment and spiritual strength should be our goal.

Which brings me back to the problem of tolerance and offense. To move beyond offense and tolerance, to dig deeply into the profound differences that we experience, seeking to see the face, the light and the love of Christ in those with whom we disagree, is itself to actively embrace the love about which Paul wrote so eloquently in 1 Corinthians 13.

Christ calls us to a unity so large, a love so expansive, a mutual encounter so earthshaking that we rediscover our faith anew in the one who offends us most.