

Sermon: "A Prayer for Unity"
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A PRAYER FOR UNITY

Today's lesson is in the form of a prayer. In fact, this prayer is the last thing the disciples heard before Jesus made his way to the Garden of Gethsemane. It closes the Last Supper and begins the story of the Passion. And though it was a prayer to his heavenly Father, I think it was also a prayer meant to be overheard by others.

I have always been concerned that my spoken prayers be expressions of worship toward God and not just another way of preaching. Jesus had some rather harsh things to say about those who wanted to impress others with their showy prayers.

But, despite that warning, there is a sense in which prayers have a horizontal as well as a vertical dimension. Prayers are directed toward God, but sometimes, they are also directed toward others as well. There is something about my name being mentioned in a prayer that makes a difference. I know that someone is so concerned about me that they are willing to come before God with my name.

When we have our morning prayer of intercession, I am happy that many of you often stand up and talk about those who need our prayers. That's a special moment for me when someone summons up the courage and trust to share a concern that is on their heart.

And, in a similar vein, it must have been a special moment for the disciples when they heard their names mentioned in prayer by Jesus. What would he say? What did he desire for them so much that he would make it the subject of one of his last moments before the Passion?

But, more than just being a special moment for the disciples back then, I would contend that it was also a special moment for us as well. Notice that in his farewell prayer Jesus said, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ..."

This is Jesus' last prayer for us as well, and as such it represents the essence of what he wants for those who would be his disciples. So what is his greatest desire for those who would be his disciples?

The answer is simple. The answer is unity.

Jesus prays that we will all be one just as the Father and the Son are one. The unity of the Christian community is to be so great that it is to mirror the unity found between God the Father and God the Son.

And there is a reason for such unity. It is to be a witness to the world. In John 17:23 we read, "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."

THE CHURCH DIVIDED

Now, that's a nice thought, a beautiful prayer. But, unfortunately it seems to be a vain wish. It seems a shame that the church has never lived up to that prayer. The church is not and never has been united.

Indeed, as we read the gospels, we find that there was disunity among the disciples of Jesus Christ before the church was even formed. I guess the most obvious example is James and John vying to sit on the right and left of Jesus in his glory. The other disciples were indignant at what these two had asked, maybe because they had failed to ask for it themselves. Now we could chalk up the infighting of the disciples as due their lack of understanding, but even after the resurrection and the ascension there are indications that the disciples were not all that united in their Christian witness.

One of the first examples of Christian infighting is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Apparently, the apostle Peter would not associate with some Gentiles whom he had accepted earlier. He did this not because he really thought it was wrong but because he wanted to "save face" with his stricter Jewish brothers. You see, at that time, they believed it was necessary to be a Jew in order to become a disciple of Jesus Christ. And that meant following Jewish rules, one of which was refusing to associate closely with anyone outside of the Jewish faith.

In the book of Galatians, Paul challenged Peter on his hypocrisy, and this division between Jews and Gentiles became a major source of contention in the early church. Eventually it was decided by saying that Gentiles could be followers of Christ without becoming Jews, but not without the first church wide meeting and a whole lot of discussion.

Amazingly enough, despite a lack of unity in the church, the church continued to grow. But, settling the Gentile/Jew question did not bring an end to divisive conflicts. Even as the church grew in numbers through the power of God's Spirit, the church also seemed to grow in its divisiveness as well.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we read about a Gentile church that was extremely divided. The church was divided over loyalty to various charismatic leaders. The church was divided over moral issues. The church was divided over customs and by social class. The church was divided over issues of pride and power. The church was divided on what constituted proper worship.

Sounds like a rather modern list doesn't it? In fact, these sound like the very issues that will be debated by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church this year and every year for the foreseeable future. But, these are issues that divide not only our particular church; they are also the issues that divide our country as a whole. We are struggling for unity because we have different views about leadership, morality and the proper use of power.

How can we possibly be as one when we are so divided? The answer is to remember that though we disagree, our disagreements are not nearly as important as what unites us. And what unites us? For Christians the answer is clear. The call of Christ unites us.

Paul asked the Corinthians some rhetorical questions in order to challenge their foolish divisions that were based upon leader worship. He asked, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?"

Of course we know the correct answer to those questions. Christ is not divided. We are not baptized into the name of Paul or any other leader. But, often we act as if this were not true.

We divide ourselves along denominational lines. We divide ourselves according to race and culture. The church can and often has become a personality cult, dependent upon the charismatic leadership of a particular leader.

According to the prayer of Jesus, our divisions are wrong. As theologian Karl Barth put it, "The disunity of the church is a scandal."

Garrison Keillor wrote about the scandal of our disunity using the mythical town of Lake Wobegon. He wrote,

"...in a town where everyone was either Lutheran or Catholic, we were neither. We were Sanctified Brethren, a sect so tiny that nobody but us and God knew about it, so when kids asked what I was, I said Protestant. It was too much to explain, like having six toes. You would rather keep your shoes on.

Grandpa Cotton was once tempted toward Lutheranism by a preacher who gave a rousing sermon on grace. Grandpa heard that sermon as a young man while taking Aunt Ester's dog home who had chased a Model T across town.

He sat down on the church steps and listened to this voice boom out the open windows until he made up his mind to go in and unite with the truth. But, he took one look from the vestibule and left. Grandpa said, "He was dressed up like the pope of Rome, and the altar and the painting and the gold candle sticks....my gosh, it was just a big show. And he was reading the whole darn thing off a page, like an actor."

I wonder sometimes if the divisions in the Christian church aren't due more to differences of style than to real differences of opinion. Like Grandpa Cotton, if we could somehow hear the message of others without being so preoccupied with the window dressing, we might be more inclined to unite with the truth. We might be more inclined to talk about the beliefs that we share instead of emphasizing our differences.

I think we need to remember that this is not the church of John Calvin, John Wesley, Martin Luther or Simon Peter. This is not my church or your church, no matter how long we've been here or how much we've done. This is the church of Jesus Christ. It is in his name and his name alone that we have been baptized.

UNITY BUT NOT UNIFORMITY

I think I told some of you that several years ago when I served as pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Burlington, NC, we received word one night that a local church near us, the West Burlington UMC had burned to the ground. I was never as proud of a congregation as I was of the church in NC. That night several elders called me and said, "We need to invite those folks to share this church building until they can construct a new church." So we did.

I can remember quite clearly standing before that orphaned congregation the first Sunday morning they were there. I told them jokingly that they had great courage in allowing a Presbyterian minister with a fist full of notes the opportunity to speak to a full house!

But, I also told them that their tragedy offered us a unique opportunity to talk about the true nature of the church. After a few words of welcome and encouragement, I told them that I didn't want to hear any more talk about letting them use "our" church. I said, "This is not our church. There is only one church, the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And we are all a part of that one church."

I heard some hearty "amens" to that statement. It was a time when I think that (in a small way at least) the prayer of Jesus became a reality, and I consider it to be one of the highlights of my ministry.

But, our lesson for today suggests that Jesus would like all of us to say "amen" to that statement all the time and not just for a fleeting moment out of necessity. Jesus wants all of us to long for unity between brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus wants us to be an inclusive community.

But, ironically, some who want unity the most often create discord. Several years ago there was a representative from an organization called COCU that visited Presbytery. COCU (which was uncharitably called "cuckoo" by those who opposed them) stood for something like the council of

churches uniting. It was an organization that looked at passages like we read today and decided that there was a mandate for the church to work toward organizational unity.

The spokesman from COCU suggested to the Presbytery that day that the next step for the Presbyterian Church in their relationship with this organization was to elect a bishop! Now, as most of you know, one of the basic tenets of the Presbyterian form of government is the belief that the Greek word from the Bible that they translated bishops, "presbuteros" is translated by us as presbyters or elders. It's where we get the idea that elected representatives rule the church.

And we believe that those decisions are always made by a group of those representatives. We think it is significant that the word, presbuteros never occurs in the singular. It is always plural. In other words his suggestion struck at the very heart of what it meant to be Presbyterian!

Suffice it say that what followed at our meeting that day was not a unifying experience! And yet, I do think that his heart was in the right place. Perhaps, his heart just led him to take the wrong action. I believe that organizational unity is not required or even desired in order to fulfill Christ's prayer for unity. I believe that unity can be had without resorting to a dull uniformity.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians talked about the church as the body of Christ. Just as a body has different parts, so the church is made up of various parts. There is unity, but that unity is unity within a God given diversity. In my opinion, the most Christ like view of other denominations is to see them as Christians who emphasize different aspects of the same truth.

One commentator put it this way,

"At its humble best, a denomination is a reminder to us that we have only part of the picture. The minute that I, as a Presbyterian Christian acknowledge the presence of AME Zion Christians and Episcopal Christians [and so forth], I have confessed that God's truth is larger than my own particular reading of it. And I confess that Jesus is praying also for them."

UNITED IN GLORY

We can be united in Spirit without being united as an organization. However, according to this passage, there is one thing that is necessary to unite the church of Christ in all its diversity. It is the presence of God's glory. In John 17:22 Jesus prays, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one."

The word "glory" is too rich for us to explore in detail but suffice it to say that it refers to the luminescent presence of God. It speaks of knowing God in a deep and intimate way such that we know God's will for our lives.

Jesus said that he received glory from the Father who loved him before the creation of the world. (John 17:24) A good passage to look at when you are talking about the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is Mark 1:10-11. This passage describes the baptism of Jesus, and in that passage we read,

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. [11] And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In this passage the glory of God is given to Jesus through signs, the rending of the heavens and the descent of the Holy Spirit like a dove, but most of all the glory of God is given to Jesus through a promise. The voice from heaven tells Jesus that he is God's Son, whom God loves.

I think that this is how the unifying glory of God is given to us as well, as a promise. God tells us that we are His children, that He loves us. We are in the family. And that one fact unites us.

This runs counter to what the world teaches us. The world tells us that we must prove our worth, that we are nothing unless we are able to make a mark for ourselves in the world. And even those who are successful and powerful often do not enjoy life, because they are driven to attain those goals by a sense of inferiority and a need to prove their worth to others.

But, into the midst of all these worldly voices of accusation and self-doubt comes the voice of God in all His glory saying, "I love you."

It is not a love that is earned. It is a love that comes from above. It is an invitation that is freely given. All we have to do is accept. This is the force that unifies us in all our diversity and uncertainty. It is this love that binds the community of faith together. This love that comes with no strings attached calls us into communion with each other.

Communion of course is another word for the Lord's Supper. In the Lord's Supper we remember that the love and sacrifice of Jesus binds us together as a holy family. The word communion means literally in "union with." So, when we take the Lord's Supper it is always wrong to talk about "closed communion," suggesting that those outside of our denomination are not welcome to participate.

How can communion be closed? It is always open because it is about the open and embracing love of God in Jesus Christ.

We in the church should always be realistic about the unity we seek. We will always be on the road to what God wants us to be. But, believe this. God can and will use us for his glory despite our weaknesses and shortcomings. The power of God's gracious love is still breathtaking in its ability to unify and heal.

Rabbi Harold Kushner told of something that happened in his youth that made a big impression on him. A business associate of his father had died under particularly tragic circumstances. Kushner accompanied his father to the funeral. Priests and counselors who were trying to make them feel better surrounded the man's widow and children. They knew all the right words, but nothing helped. They were beyond being comforted.

The widow kept saying, "I know you're right, but it doesn't make any difference."

Then a man walked into the funeral home. He was a big burly man in his eighties who was a legend in the toy and game industry. He had escaped Russia as a youth after having been arrested and tortured by the Czar's secret police. He had come to this country illiterate and penniless and had built an immensely successful company. He was known as a hard bargainer and a ruthless competitor.

But, despite his success, he had never learned to read or write. He hired people to read his mail to him. The joke in the industry was that he could write a check for a million dollars, and the hardest part would be signing his name at the bottom.

He had been sick recently, and his face and his walking showed it. But, he walked over to the widow and started to cry, and she cried with him. And you could feel the atmosphere in the room change.

The man who never read a book in his life spoke the language of the heart and held the key that opened the gates of solace where learned doctors and clergy could not.

This is the kind of love that can bring unity in the church and world. It does not require that we be experts. It does not even require superior morality. What it does require is that we be willing to open up our hearts to the needs of others, to cry with those who grieve and rejoice with those who have reason to give thanks.

It is in these simple actions that we find the glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. In these simple acts of love we find something that does hold us together. We become one. We become a part of something holy.

I want to close this morning by reading verse 6 of Charles Wesley's hymn "Christ From Whom All Blessings Flow:"

"Love, like death, hath all destroyed,
rendered all distinctions void;
names and sects and parties fall:
thou, O Christ, art all in all."

May God give us that kind of love, a love that brings unity and hope to all in the name of Christ Jesus.

Amen.