



“Unity? Or Uniformity?”

Text: John 17:20-26

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

**Ascension Sunday
June 2, 2019**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Today we celebrate the Ascension of the Lord. It is really the final Sunday in the Season of Easter. Next week, we celebrate Pentecost and the gift of the Spirit to empower the church. Today, we remember Jesus saying an earthly good-bye to his disciples.

The scripture lesson for the day is a little confusing. Our passage from the Gospel of John is from the night before Jesus' crucifixion and death. It is part of the Upper Room Discourses that appear only in John's Gospel. In particular, our passage is from a portion of those discourses known as the “High Priestly” prayer of Jesus. Jesus' prayer is a prayer of concern for his disciples and those who would be discipled by them.

Above all, Jesus' prayer is that those who believe in him may be one - even as Jesus is one with God. Jesus prays that God will bind the church - that is, those who are believers in Jesus - into one, unified body. Jesus prays that the church may be as inseparable from one another as Jesus is inseparable God.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have seen me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Now, a quick look across the face of the church calls into question whether or not Jesus' prayer was answered. Look across the face of the church in North America and you see apparent divisions of every kind. There are denominations and movements within the Church. There are different translations of Scripture used by different congregations. There are different styles of worship. There is different music used in various communities of faith. There is disagreement over the number of sacraments given to the church. There is conflict over who can be a part of a church and who can't - and even more - there is disparity and disparagement over who can be ordained to leadership and who can't.

Look at the church - here and around the world. We are apparently deeply fractured. We are, to all outward appearance, in a state of disunity. We emphasize our differences and condemn those fellow Christians who do not see things exactly as we see them. We make fun of their teaching as if we were the sole possessors of the truth. We deride the music they use as if we were the sole arbiter of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate for the worship of God. We laugh behind upraised hands at those who practice their faith in ways that differ from our own. We question the intelligence - if not the mental health - of brothers and sisters who do not copy what we believe, and say, and do.

We have understood "unity" to be "uniformity." We take Jesus' prayer to be a prayer that we will all be exactly alike. We want there to be no differences. We want there to be no distinctions. We abhor contrasts. We detest differentiations. We want the Church to be like the lyrics of the theme song from the old Patty Duke show: "they laugh alike, they walk alike, at times they even talk alike..."

And, of course, we want everyone to be like us. That's because we're right and everyone else is wrong. We think all churches ought to have bulletins and hymnbooks. We think all churches should say "debts" instead of "trespasses." We think all churches should have soaring gothic sanctuaries and stained glass windows. If those people really want to be faithful followers of Jesus, they ought to be like us!

We think that unity should mean that the Church should be like McDonald's. There's no question of what you'll find at a McDonald's, whether you are in Evansville, Indiana - Kalamazoo, Michigan - Gunnison, Colorado - Pocatello, Idaho - or anywhere else in the world. They are all exactly the same - same layout, same menu, same, same, same. Was Jesus' prayer for unity in the Church a franchise offer for every church to be just like every other church?

How awful that would be. What a horrific happening it would be if all the churches in all the world were exactly the same. What an abomination it would be to dismiss the unique personality given by God to each community of faith and instead settle for a Stepford kind of church, where everyone thinks the same, dresses the same, drives the

same vehicles, votes the same, likes the same music, reads the same books, watches the same shows, eats the same foods, holds the same opinions, and on and on and on. What an ingratitude to God to deny the uniquenesses with which every person is created and to trade them for a undernourished uniformity.

Jesus' prayer for unity is something that is God-given. As we will be reminded next week, it is by the Spirit of God - given to the church - that we are joined to one another and to God. It is by the Spirit of God - given to the church - that we are transformed into the one body with many parts that Paul teaches us to be.

When you look closely, you will discover that we disparate Christians in disparate churches actually have far more in common that is readily seen. We all believe in God. We all believe in Jesus Christ. We all believe in the Holy Spirit. We all believe that the Scriptures are essential for faith and life. We all believe that, in one way or another, faith must be put into action. We all believe that we have been invited to join together in expanding the borders of God's kingdom of love.

Why would we trade that God-given unity, for the pale imitation of unity that is uniformity? Why would we return God's gift of unity, in exchange for everyone doing exactly the same thing? Why would we throw back into God's face the gift of uniqueness, in order to be "just like everyone else?"

In Jesus Christ, God has made us one. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God has empowered us to meet the challenge of taking the good news of God's love into the world in word and deed. Through the common work of the Church, we have been made partners with Jesus Christ in healing the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving safe drink to the thirsty, and offering hope and companionship to the imprisoned.

And since Jesus is no longer on earth, it's up to us.

Jesus prayed:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.

Who is Jesus talking about? You, and you, and you, and me. Jesus prays that we will be one.

Let us put away pride, arrogance, superiority, smug self-satisfaction, and all the rest, and let us rejoice in the unity of the Church - the body of Christ - which is a gift from God which must be received with gratitude and thanksgiving.

Let us be the one body of Christ - united with each other and with our God, for now and evermore. Amen.



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