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“Unity”

(John 17:18-22, 26) 18 [Jesus prayed,] “As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. 19 And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. 20 I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may all be one, as we are one.... 26 I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

When I was a teenager, all my friends told me I was a “church nerd.” I guess I was. I went to my first General Assembly of the Disciples denomination when I was 17. I never missed church camp in the summer or the other Regional youth events throughout the year. I would go hang out at both my church and at the Regional office just because I thought it was fun. I also got appointed by the church board chair to be the youth representative to the Board. I felt very self-important as was allowed to witness and be a part of debates over the color to paint the church parlor and other such weighty things – although in the middle of those sorts of discussions I wondered whether nerdiness had slipped over into masochism. Now, of course, it’s easy to make fun of such things, but the truth is also that the Church Board didn’t only deal with the small and the everyday items related to the functioning of the church; they also on occasion dealt with some really, really important items. Sometimes these items could be pretty contentious. It was, after all, the mid-60s and a turbulent time in American life and that turbulence and the issues facing society made their way into church too. There was one particular member of the Board – let’s call him David – who often found himself on the losing side of votes about important issues. David’s point of view was often different, and during the Council’s deliberations he would argue mightily, but always respectfully, for that point of view. But finally, the vote would be taken and, as I

say, David would more often than not find himself on the losing side of the vote. But this is where he taught me so very, very much; a lesson that has stayed with me a very long time. After the vote was announced by the Moderator, David's hand would immediately go up and he would make a motion that the vote now be made unanimous in favor of the side that had won the vote. In other words, in the interests of unity, after he lost a vote he changed his vote to support the winning side; and he invited, by his motion, the others who had voted with him to change their votes as well so that the Board could come out of that meeting speaking with one voice, speaking in unity.

This was a lesson in what we used to call "churchmanship" that I have never forgotten. It is something you seldom see today. I suppose there are many reasons for that: in the last forty years our society has gotten more angry, I think, and less willing to compromise. In fact, "compromise" in the 19th and much of the twentieth centuries was thought of as a very commendable virtue. Nowadays, though, under the influence of too many special interest groups – whether on the right or the left – it seems to be the case that "compromise" is much more of a dirty word; there are many, many groups who will tell you that any compromise whatsoever with whatever "their" positions are is not a virtue but a moral failure. Our 24-hour, internet-driven, 300-cable-tv-channel, conspiracy-theory-loving society has made gestures like David's seem quaint or even weird, but certainly not something to be lauded or held up as an example.

Those are some of the things I have been thinking about this week as I considered our scripture for today, the gospel of John's portrayal of Jesus' last prayer with his disciples. It is, as it were, according to John, Jesus' "last will and testament" as he conveys his hopes, instructions, and expectations for the disciples. It is, also, by the way, the longest recorded prayer of Jesus' in any of the gospels. And at the center of it is that famous line, a line that Jesus says twice: "*so that they may all be one.*" This

prayer – “*so that they may all be one*” – has animated church folks down through the ages. It was the guiding hope of some of the founders of our own movement; as one of them said, “Christian unity is our polar star.” Our sister denomination, the United Church of Christ, was formed in the late 50s with similar hopes; in fact the United Church of Christ’s logo includes Jesus’ phrase “*So that they may all be one.*” This morning, then, I want to take a few minutes and think about this notion of “unity” and ask what can might be able to learn about Christian unity from this long prayer of Jesus. What might Jesus mean – and not mean – by the idea of “being one,” by the idea of “unity”? Well, let me suggest three things that this idea of “unity” means – and does not mean.

First of all, unity does not mean uniformity. Whenever churches – or, for that matter, families or friends or any organization – make that mistake then they are inevitably less than they could be. One of the issues that sometimes often comes up – or should! – in pre-marital counseling, for example, is to what extent the couple does or should enjoy doing the very same things. But the mistake some couples make is to think that their tastes and desires must be absolutely uniform and united in every way. This, though, only leads to resentment and frustration. For example, Barbara and I learned early in our marriage that we both loved to travel and that there were many things we indeed loved to do together and that our tastes in many things about travel were indeed the same. Some of our best memories of times together are from our shared travels. But we also discovered that there had some differences. For example, I love the southwestern desert; I love driving through it for hours at a time. But, as the phrase goes in our family, that is “not her favorite.” She, on the other hand, loves to visit gardens and admire the variety of horticulture that someplace not the desert provides. But I get bored silly with that. Luckily we were able to realize early on that we

didn't need to be completely uniform in these tastes to have a deep unity to our lives together and our marriage – and, in fact, we were more interesting to one another when we each took some time each year to do those particular things we loved with other folks. So annually, I try to spend some time doing a desert road trip, and, in similar fashion, she tries to regularly get together with her friends and part of their agenda is finding places where they can share their appreciation of the beauty of gardening.

It can be similar with churches too. A church that is growing, lively, and thriving will not stake its unity on any kind of uniformity. A church that is growing, lively, and thriving will have a variety of activities and some of those will be of no interest to some of the folks. A church that is growing, lively, and thriving will have a variety of music and worship styles, knowing that some of them will speak deeply to some folks but will not be other folks' "thing." And a church that is growing, lively, and thriving will not simply *tolerate* those differences of taste but will *celebrate* them. The alternative – uniformity – is so much grimmer. When there is an expectation or belief that a church's unity lies in a complete uniformity of belief or practices or styles, then what you often end up with is a kind of "lowest common denominator" life where only the things that everybody can agree on are allowed. But whether in church or relationships or marriage or family, such an attitude leads not to liveliness, but to boredom. And the last thing that the church ought to ever be is boring!

"So that they may all be one." Let us notice a second thing about this prayer. Sometimes Christians have explicitly or unintentionally defined what "all" means in much too small a fashion. You can see this in many ways in Christian history. In certain quarters, it is said that if you want to start a new church, you should target that church to people who are pretty much exactly alike – with similar economic means, similar politics, similar ethnicity. But you see the problem with this (and this scenario

has played out too many times all across the United States in recent years): churches that do this sort of “targeting” end up making the “all” far too small, and they inadvertently end up sending the message to those around them, to their community, that “all” really only means “some” – and the “right” kind of “some” at that. It’s as if these folks have re-translated Jesus’ prayer into “That some of them may be one.” Or, much more tragically and odiously, there have been those in our own American past who have said that slaves were not, in fact, human beings at all and that therefore Jesus’ words about unity, about being one, did not mean that that slaves were included. President Warren Harding once said that God only listens to prayers said in English and does not listen to those said by Jewish folks. As a child, I went during a few summers to a family friend’s church for Vacation Bible School, and I remember two things, mainly, about it: the Grape Nehi soda that we got at morning break and the matter-of-fact way that we children who were not members of that church were told that we would be going to hell. There have been and continue to be churches that achieve their unity by making sure that gay and lesbian folks are not welcome unless they renounce the way that God made them. *You see, unity is much easier when it is confused with exclusivity.* But that is hardly the kind of unity that Jesus meant.

And now let us notice a third and final thing about Jesus’ prayer. The unity that Jesus prayed for was not simply for its own sake. It was not simply so we’d all feel good about each other, that we’d all be of precisely the same mind. That is once again the attitude of a club, not a church. No, it is important, it is crucial, to look at **why** Jesus prayed that they all might be one: it is for the sake of the mission of the church. How is that so? Well, look at who Jesus is praying for: he is praying for the world. **He is praying for those who do not yet know the gospel but will come to know it because the disciples and those who come after them will demonstrate such a love of God that those who don’t know God will be convinced.** Who are those who

come after them? That's you and me. Jesus' prayer is for us to be faithful to God's true character and never get sidetracked. God's character is love: amazing, unbounded, perfect love. If you and I squabble or insist on a narrow uniformity then we will not reflect God's love unbounded and our witness will be less than convincing. Put another way, Jesus is praying that his disciples – and we – will continue the work he began to make God known. And to the extent to which we are indeed able to answer Jesus' prayer with our lives, then we make known how much God loves the world and how eager Jesus is that, as he puts it in Chapter 17, all "may be with me where I am" (John 17:24).¹

Does all of that completely answer the mysteries and complexities and conundrums of this text? No. You and I are still imperfect. But Jesus' prayer is that we never be more imperfect than we need to be! Jesus' prayer is the hope that amidst the deep, deep disagreements that we might have with certain folks over important and even essential theological points, that we will never write anyone off, never make the "all" smaller than God hopes it can be. And what that means when we encounter those kind of theological disagreements is this: we do God a disservice if we don't take them seriously, if we don't contend mightily with theological points of view that we think are harmful and hurtful. We do so because we are convinced that the world can come to know a grace-filled, gracious, loving, including God who bears healing and hope for all and excludes no one. We are a long way yet from the world's knowing that kind of unity, knowing that kind of God. But we continue to strive for it, because that is the mission Christ has called us to do. And that, my friends, is also what makes it imperative that we remain unified in our passion for the mission of our congregation.

¹The previous two sentences adapted from Mary Hinkle
http://maryhinkle.typepad.com/pilgrim_preaching/2004/05/getting_on_the_.html

For we, indeed, are Jesus' latter-day disciples, called to demonstrate that we exist not just for ourselves but for those who don't know the God that we know. And we will demonstrate that to a needy and hurting world so much better when that mission is far more important to us than any of the differences we might have.

It may seem sometimes like a lot to ask. But it's not. For God goes with us, God helps us, God keeps on working for the day when indeed, all – really: all! – shall be one. God will not give up. Because God, like my long-ago fellow church member David, intends to make the outcome unanimous. May it be so; may they all be one.