

“Beloved Community of Mine!”
C Easter 7; John 17:20-26
May 16, 2021; 10:00 am
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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²⁰⁻²³ I’m praying not only for them
But also for those who will believe in me
Because of them and their witness about me.
The **goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind**—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
So they’ll be as unified and together as we are—
I in them and you in me.
Then they’ll be mature in this oneness,
And give the godless world evidence
That you’ve sent me and loved them
In the same way you’ve loved me.

²⁴⁻²⁶ Father, I want those you gave me
To be with me, right where I am,
So they can see my glory, the splendor you gave me,
Having loved me
Long before there ever was a world.
Righteous Father, the world has never known you,
But I have known you, and these disciples know
That you sent me on this mission.
I have made your very being known to them—

Who you are and what you do—
And continue to make it known,
So that your love for me
Might be in them
Exactly as I am in them.

I. UNITY AIN’T EASY!

Say what, Jesus? We need to all get along? Your followers need to agree on what you said, taught, and showed us? Yikes! We’re not very good at that!

A mainline Christian campus minister shares in the Christian Century this week that we’ve got a long way to go in “Christian Unity!” It’s not the “other kinds” of groups who work against her, but the Christian ones! “On our campus, a variety of Christian groups and parachurch organizations compete for my students’ attention. Some work with me, but others aggressively subvert my authority (as chaplain on staff), pitting themselves in competition with my programs and with the other Christian groups on campus. Christians, especially those of different theological persuasions, don’t play well together.

Bruce Epperly shares a similar dismay: “My practice in lectionary preaching is to search the internet to see how others handle the topic of the week. It came as no particular surprise that many ministers preaching on Jesus’ prayer for the unity of all believers included lists of those they thought needed to be excluded for various reasons. At least

some Christians do not set a priority to overcome our differences and live in unity with peace, justice, and harmony. Perhaps when they say "let us agree to disagree," they mean "let us agree to disagree until the Lord shows you that I am right."

Another approach (perhaps the wrong one!) to achieve unity in the church is to try and appeal to everyone. The church humor magazine "The Door" facetiously announced these newly formed churches seeking to do just that:

Potluck Assembly

Little Bit O' Bible Church

Church of the Big P.A.

The Short-Term Pastor Center

Theology-Free Church

The Inaccurate Heart of Mary Catholic Church

Seldom United Church

Bill Gates' Memorial Geek Orthodox

New Wife Fellowship

Church of the Perpetual Building Program

Comfortable Pew Family Center

Clean Bathroom Bible Temple

Better Than the Rest Believer's Fellowship

Legalist Bondage Assembly

The Church Where the Pastor's Family Runs Everything

The Two-Or-More-But-Sometimes-Less-Depending-On-Who-Shows-Up Bible Church

Feelgood Fellowship

Twist-and-Shout Revival Center

(John Green, "Newly Formed Churches," The Door, March-April 2000, p. 15.)

PORCUPINES!!

The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared the human race to a bunch of **porcupines** huddling together on a cold winter's night. He said, "The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness."

"May they all be one," says Jesus. How often do we hear that and not know how to make it happen? Maybe the problem is that—*we* try to make it happen and it's not something we can achieve—at least without a whole lot of holy help!

Note what Jesus *doesn't* say. Jesus does not pray that we all think and act alike. Or agree on things we shouldn't. He doesn't pray that we ignore injustice. He prays that we be in relationship with one another—no matter how hard, and seemingly hopeless.

II. HOLY HOSPITALITY MORE THAN UNITY?

George Hermanson—suggests a wholly other approach. That maybe we step back and look at this very real struggle from a higher plane—that of “Holy Hospitality.”

I would put this in very simple terms, and this is a prayer I have prayed often: “Lord, I’m having trouble loving this person! They are pushing all my buttons and we don’t see eye-to-eye on much of anything. You gotta love them through me—I can’t do it.”

Hermanson describes the practice of *Holy Hospitality* like this:

“God has assigned us the care of the world and all who inhabit it. We are to model ourselves around this dynamic love that is fresh in every generation. This *lure* of God is directed to the dream of God where all will enjoy holy hospitality. Now this is *not* uniformity, nor one size fits all.

Holy hospitality is to be the place where all grow in wisdom and strength where the blind see and the lame walk - this is the meaning of unity - to be the church of welcome to the variety of colors around us - to be a *rainbow* in a world that seeks monochromatic experience. In this way our testimony is a living organism. We practice our faith by living for the common good.

Epperly adds to that, stressing that it takes not just passive welcome, but an active reaching out:

“Authentic faith breaks down barriers, goes beyond polarization, and expands the circle of concern to embrace enemies *as well as* friends. The attractiveness of the church is in its unpredictable openness to whatever God calls for, beyond our political, religious, ethical, and relational stereotypes.

But, what about when the messages come across the land—especially from our own faith tradition of Christianity, that are anything but unifying? We’ve heard a lot of divisive, hate-inciting, not-loving language about our brothers and sisters in recent months—even from faith leaders. Do we sit quietly by and say nothing, thinking this is promoting Christian Unity, and that’s what Jesus was asking for?

“Jesus, when you prayed that “all may be one” and we be “one in the Spirit one in the Lord,” does that mean we have to *agree* with the message and methods of those who seem to be preaching just the opposite?

When I ask that question of the Holy one, I continually receive the same answer: “No! We need to “discern the spirits.” To prayerfully watch, listen and ask, “What are the fruits of their teaching and labors? What gospel are they preaching?”

We are called by Jesus himself to discern and defy hatred, bigotry, abuse of power, nationalism, racial supremacy or religious exceptionalism—*anytime* one

race or creed or personhood is pitted over and against another.

We must *resist* false teachers, not aid and abet—especially if they claim to be doing it in the name of the God we believe in and claim to follow. That's not *our* Lord Jesus Christ preaching that message. Our God is a God of justice and love—of belovedness for *all* our neighbors—not just some.

Like with the teaching on “turning the other cheek,” Jesus is *not* telling his followers in this passage to be doormats. Not calling them and us to let evil walk all over us in the name of “Christian unity.”

The **goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind**—
(says Jesus.) Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then they'll be mature in this oneness,
And give the godless world evidence
That you've sent me and loved them
In the same way you've loved me.

What is the evidence *of*? That is the discerning question to ask, according to Jesus' prayer. Is it evidence of God's love for all? How “God so loved the *whole* world, that he gave his only begotten son” to save and love all?

How is a Christlike heart, mind and love for God and all neighbors being evidenced?

If we don't see that and hear that coming from the “teachers” they might be false teachers. We need to read our bibles, reach out with an even *louder* voice and Christ's loving arms and resist. “That they may all be one” means we need to get on the same page—the true gospel page—not the fake one.

IV. YOU ARE BELOVED! BE-LOVE ONE ANOTHER!

Finally, my brothers and sisters, I'm going to leave you for yet a little while. I won't be here with you in the flesh, but you will not be alone, or left without loving and wise leadership.

Take this message of Jesus in his prayer for his disciples: The love that God the Parent has for the child is the *same* love that we are to have for one another. A tall order, but we are not without holy assistance.

We have his example to follow, and his teachings to trust. If you've learned nothing else from me, note this:

You are beloved children of God and so is your neighbor. And the stranger, widow, orphan, immigrant and foreigner in your midst.

My charge to you as we launch into this season:

a) Keep practicing Holy Hospitality

b) They'll know we are _____ by our love?

Christian. Open, inclusive, welcoming of all.

Open-minded, open hearts, open to new ideas and experiences.

c) Keep being the Beloved Community.

Remind yourself every day—wrap up in a scarf or a prayer shawl; look in a mirror and repeat these words:
“I am a beloved child of God.”

Then, look at your neighbor—of all walks, shapes and sizes, and say, “YOU are beloved!”

A Prayer of Invocation (John 17: 20-26)

Mysterious God,
You reveal yourself in Jesus, your Beloved Child
who gives us a glimpse your glory
and invites us to share in the unity of all that is Holy:
the holiness that is You, your creation, your people,
united in the Spirit that breaks through all boundaries of
fear and injustice.

Meet us here today, O Unity, and teach us to be one:

One in love for each other
One in love for Creation
One in understanding
with all who find in Jesus the Way to You
One in peace with all who find other paths
to your Truth.

We ask all this in the name of Jesus, whose fervent prayer
was ever: “May they all be one.” Amen