

“Church Unity”
John 17:20-26
June 23, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage is all about church unity, which is an appropriate topic for churches in transition like Altadena, because we are vulnerable to disunity. Change is an inescapable part of pastoral transitions, and most people don’t like change. You may have heard me quote Steve Brown in the past saying, “Presbyterians have to be careful when they do something for the first time, because they’ll be doing it that way for the next two-hundred years.” Satan will attempt to take advantage of the discomfort brought about by change and attempt to use it to sow disunity in a church. When it becomes apparent that the new pastor will do some things differently than me, some will see that as a good thing while others as a negative. The difference has the potential of bringing about disunity. The church is often like a story I read years ago about two men riding a tandem bicycle when they came to the bottom of a long, steep hill. After a great deal of struggle, they finally made it to the top. The man on the front of the bicycle turned and said to the other, “Boy, that sure was a hard climb.” The fellow in back replied, “Yes, and if I hadn’t kept the brakes on all the way we would certainly have rolled down backwards.” The church is often divided between those whose focus is on moving forward while there are others who are committed to making sure the church doesn’t move backwards.

We considered last week the first part of John 17, a chapter in which Jesus prays for his disciples. He prays for them as they are sent into the world just as Jesus was sent into the world. In other words, just as God so loved the world and sent his Son into the world, now he has so loved the world that he sends his church into the world. This last section of his prayer is devoted to praying for unity in the Church. This prayer is surprising on two levels. First, it is the main prayer request Jesus makes for 2000 years of church history. Notice that Jesus in this last part of his prayer is praying not just **“for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word”** (v. 20). He’s not just praying for the 11 disciples in this section, but for the Church throughout this current age. We are those who have believed in Jesus through the word of the original apostles. If you were limited to one prayer request for the church for its entire existence, what would you pray? Jesus doesn’t pray for prosperity or power, but for unity.

The second surprising thing about Jesus’ prayer for unity is the fact that he ties it to evangelistic fruitfulness. He prays for unity **“so that the world may believe that you have sent me”** (v. 21). Suppose you were put in charge of your church’s evangelism program, and you were asked to list some of the church characteristics that would lead to greater evangelistic effectiveness. If

we hadn't just read this passage, would unity even appear on your list? At least in this passage, it's the only thing Jesus mentions. Let's look more carefully, then, at this unity Jesus emphasizes.

I. The Meaning of Unity

The meaning of unity can be seen in the analogy Jesus gives for our unity. He prays **“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you”** (v. 21). The relationships of the three persons of the Trinity are the model for the unity Jesus asks for his church. We can summarize this trinitarian unity as loving interdependence. Christians believe in one God who has existed eternally in three persons. Where you have more than one person, you have a relationship. Relational community is part of the very nature of God, and those trinitarian relationships are marked by both love and interdependence. They are marked by love in the fact that each member of the trinity seeks the good of the other two rather than acting selfishly. Trinitarian relationships are also marked by interdependence in the fact that they depend on one another. There is both unity and diversity within the trinity, and the same is true of our unity.

Let's develop this further by considering a couple of things unity is not. First, the unity envisaged by Jesus is not institutional. At last count, the global denominational total stood at over twenty-two thousand. People sometimes ask me if there are other Presbyterian denominations beyond our own, the Presbyterian Church in America. Without any research and using abbreviations only, I can think of the PCA (our denomination), the PCUSA, ARP, EPC, OPC, BPC, RPCNA, RPC and CPC. That's only a small sample just of Presbyterian denominations in America, which has led some to refer to us as the "split peas." Honestly, Baptists and Methodists are no better. If Jesus was praying here for institutional unity, then we would have to conclude that his prayer has gone unanswered, at least for now. This is another example of that important biblical idea of the "already-not yet" feature of the kingdom of God. There are features of unity that are already here. When you meet another Christian from a denomination other than your own, there is an immediate and deep connection you feel. You truly do sense that you are in the same family, the family of God, even if your denominational affiliations are different. That's the "already" feature of God's kingdom. But there is also a "not-yet" feature. When God's work is complete, there will be only one denomination, but that time is not yet here. Though we long for institutional unity, to seek it at all costs, such as has been attempted in what's known as the ecumenical movement, will often lead to minimizing biblical doctrine.

A second thing that unity is not is uniformity. Just as there is diversity within the trinity at the same time that there is deep unity, even so our unity doesn't require uniformity. As a matter of fact, to insist on uniformity will often

lead to greater disunity. Throughout my decades as a pastor, I have encountered church Sessions that discouraged disagreements. Inevitably, such an attitude has led to church division. The kind of unity Jesus envisions here will allow for differences on such things as political views, schooling choices made by parents, or any number of other issues that sincere Christians sometimes disagree about.

More positively, as already mentioned, unity is loving interdependence. As I near the end of the road of my time as your pastor, I have been thinking about how inefficient God's love is. As I look back on my thirty plus years as your pastor, many cringe-worthy moments come to mind. Those are the moments when I want to cringe because of the foolish things I've done or not done. Just at the moment when I have the most experience and wisdom to offer, I look in the mirror and the calendar and realize how old I am. God has been so patient with me, and you have as well. Such patient love is an essential part of unity. Interdependence is essential too. We need one another. Isolation from the body of Christ can serve to eliminate conflict, but the price will be far too high.

This kind of loving interdependence is illustrated by the habits of geese while flying in that famous V formation they employ. Scientists have discovered, for example, that the formation allows for a drafting effect that adds at least 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. The unity Jesus prays for here requires that we renounce individualism and unite in pursuit of a common goal. The hardest job while flying in formation is occupied by the lead goose. So when the lead bird tires, he will drop back in the formation and let another take his place. A unified church is one that breaks the 80-20 rule, the rule that says that 20% of the people do 80% of the work. In such a church, a handful of workers grow tired while the majority become fat and lazy. Scientists have also discovered that when a goose gets sick or wounded and has to drop out of formation, two other geese fall out of formation and follow him down to help and protect him. They stay with him until he is either able to fly or dead. Then the three will launch out either to catch up to the original group or find another group. Unity means that we stick with one another through the hard times.

II. The Means to Unity

How is this unity to be realized? I notice four answers in our passage. The first one is found in the very first verse, where Jesus talks about his followers by calling them the ones who will believe in him through the message of the apostles. One of the essentials for having unity is to be devoted to the apostle's teaching, which teaching we have in the New Testament. One of the slogans employed in the ecumenical movement of the 20th century was "doctrine divides; service unites." Jesus would disagree. If we are to have the kind of

unity of which he speaks, we must all be devoted to the apostle's teaching. If 25 pianos are all tuned to the same tuning fork, they will also be in tune with one another. We are all to be tuned to the apostle's teaching, and then by necessity we will be in tune with one another.

A second means to unity can be seen in verse 22. **“I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.”** Human beings were created by God for glory. Psalm 8:5 says that God created man **“a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.”** The followers of Jesus don't renounce the pursuit of glory. We renounce the pursuit of glory by human accomplishment. Note that Jesus says, **“I have given them glory.”** Seeking glory by human effort leads to disunity by making us competitors to one another rather than loving collaborators. The erroneous belief is that glory is a zero-sum game in which any glory you receive will reduce my glory. We must not only try to get glory for ourselves but also try to reduce glory going to others. In our sinfulness, we seek glory from riches, from athleticism, from cleverness, from being good-looking, and any number of other efforts. But the main point becomes having more of these things than the next guy. The track star feels great about being able to sprint 100 meters in 10 seconds, until another sprinter on his team does it in 9.99 seconds. Such competitiveness leads to disunity. Unity comes when we come to receive the glory Jesus gives. It is the glory of being forgiven and being made sons and daughters of God.

A third means to unity is knowing our future. I call your attention to verse 24. **“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.”** Jesus wants us to see him in his heavenly glory. He wants us to be with him in this moment because we too will share in that glory. For all the followers of Jesus, this is our future. Unity comes as we believe this future not just for ourselves, but for all our brothers and sisters in Christ as well.

Years ago, I read of some missionaries in the Philippines who set up a croquet game in their front yard. The indigenous peoples they came to serve there became interested and asked to join the game. Each one was given a mallet and ball, along with an explanation of the rules of the game. These new players, though, were puzzled by the rule that allows a player under certain circumstances to hit a fellow player's ball far off course. “Why would I want to knock his ball out of the court” they asked. “So you will be the one to win,” the missionary replied. There's was a hunting and gathering society, where people survive not by competing but by sharing and helping. So they were bewildered by this croquet rule and proceeded to play the game not to win themselves, but to help others win. As the final player passed the final wicket, they all cheered and said, “We won! We won!” Our unity is enhanced as we have the same

desire as Jesus and want our brothers and sisters to make it to the final reward of being with Jesus and sharing his glory with him.

Fourth and last, our unity is helped by knowing God, especially his love. Note the last two verses of Jesus' prayer. **“O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”** Jesus spoke of the love of the Father in staggering terms back in verse 23 when he said, **“you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”** The Father has loved the Son for all eternity, and according to Jesus he has this same love for you and me. The French philosopher Descartes is famous for his saying, “I think, therefore I am.” I was thinking about that statement as I visited my dementia-afflicted mom this past Thursday, and I was filled with joy that Jesus would disagree with Descartes. If our identity is found in human reason, then what does that say about a dementia patient? Americans commonly have a different version of Descartes' statement. “I achieve, therefore I am.” Jesus would reject that as well and have his own form of that maxim. “I receive, therefore I am.” I know and receive the love of God, and this is my identity. This is true not only of you, but of all in the family of God, the acceptance of which brings unity.

CONCLUSION:

John Maxwell tells about a man named Dan who became a member of his pastoral staff after being a member of his church and then attending seminary.

Dan was smart, highly task-oriented, but also melancholic and non-relational. His first week on the job, he walked right past me and seven or eight other people in the lobby. He never said hello or acknowledged our presence. With his briefcase in hand, face forward, he headed for his office, work on his mind. I thought, “He didn't even see us.” So I followed him into his office and said, “Dan, you just passed by your work.”

“What do you mean?”

“We were standing in the lobby, and you walked right by without speaking.”

“Man, I'd like to talk, but I've got work to do.”

“These people are our work, Dan,” I said. “We're in the people business.”

Jesus is interceding for his church even now, and his prayer for Altadena, and my prayer as well, is that we might continue to be marked by the unity God has given us, and even that this unity might grow. There is a lost and dying world that needs Jesus, and our unity is one of the chief ways they are going to know him.