

Pastor's Message – 5/29/22 (Memorial Day weekend)
John 17:20-26

Our Bible reading for today, from John's gospel, seems so appropriate and so timely in light of all the things that have been going on for us and for the world for the past two years and longer. This week, preaching the words of Jesus, Jesus' prayer for us, for His disciples, for his churches, in the poetry of the gospel of John took longer to get started.

It's kind of a made-up word, but it has always been a passion and commitment of mine, and I have always been an *ecumaniac*. That may be why I've landed in the United Methodist Church with its large umbrella of welcome. I've always been interested in working together and praying together and crossing ecumenical lines, so it is really no surprise that the phrase that struck me in this week's Bible reading is "that they will all be one" and how hard it is to do that. It's like the new heaven and the new earth that we focused on last week. It's what we strive for, but when and how are we going to get there is not easy to see.

It's a bit of a misnaming, and although we pray it every Sunday, it is not really the *Lord's Prayer*. If you were part of our *Lord's Prayer* study during Lent this year, we learned a lot about that prayer. You may remember the context of that prayer we pray every Sunday. Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray – like John the Baptist taught his disciples to pray." And so, Jesus gives His disciples a prayer to pray.

Today, however, we hear a prayer of Jesus, the *Lord's Prayer*. Today, we hear Jesus' prayer to the Father for us – for the church. Today, we hear that it is Jesus' prayer that we would know how much He and the Father love us. It can give us a sense of value and meaning in the presence of God – just how much the Father wants to be with us and us with Him.

In chapter 17 in the gospel of John, we have a plea for Jesus' followers to become *one*. It is a poetic prayer that, at the same time, is both beautiful and repetitive, as we would expect to find in the Gospel of John. We get a glimpse into Jesus' heart and longing for the believing community, which is another opportunity to try to grasp how Jesus understands unity. It is that unity that we can have with God, which is what we hear Jesus pray for today, which may be the starting point for the new heaven and the new earth that we prayed about and reflected on last week.

We know that we live in a divided world: nation against nation and so on. Even our nation seems to be more divided than ever before. Christianity

too is split among thousands of denominations. What, then, are we to make of Jesus' prayer that we would be "one" (v. 21)? What might this mean for how we understand "unity"? What might this mean for how we work/serve with other Christians? How will nonbelievers recognize our unity? How can non-believers know God if Christians are not united? Why would they want to if they can see that we are not united?

The clergy of our Circuit met for lunch this past Monday in Randolph and Pastor Francois Russel who serves Randolph and Courtland mentioned that there are ten churches in the Randolph area, a community of 1800 people. Here in the Waupun area, I think we have twenty-two churches. A lot of churches for a community of less than 11,000 people. That, in itself, makes working together difficult. The coronavirus pandemic has interrupted our monthly Clergy Association for over two years now and it has been difficult to get together again. We do little together. There have to be ways in which the Churches of the Waupun area can exhibit and practice unity and thereby show the love of God.

You all know that recently the United Methodist Church has been in the news as it has wrestled with whether and how homosexuals and transgender people can participate in the life of the church. Every mainline denomination has had this wrenching conversation in the past two decades. Unfortunately, controversies like these are most often the only reason that churches are ever covered in the press. United Methodists run hospitals and homeless shelters, soup kitchens and after school programs, food pantries and schools. Many people in this Church have made donations above and beyond their weekly tithe to aid the people of Ukraine but we're only in the news when we're having our most bitter disputes. I don't think this is what Jesus had in mind when he gave the New Commandment. He said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Jesus did not say, "Your bitter, vitriolic, and hurtful words will attract people to the Good News I offer you and intend for the world."

The divisions of liberal and conservative, high church and low church, eastern and western, Protestant and Catholic, individual gospel and social gospel and even traditional and contemporary have done precisely the opposite of what Jesus intended and prayed for us.

Rather than causing the world to believe that God sent Jesus for its salvation, we have instead caused the world to see the divisions of the church as evidence that if there's any good news in the world, it won't be found in the church. We've had far more spin-offs and breakups than

mergers and acquisitions and the unifying message and person of Jesus gets lost as churches and denominations are more apt to argue and leave one another, than work to restore a common vision and life together.

In the gospel passage for this week, the phrase "that they may be one" (or some variation) is repeated three times -- so it must be important.

Jesus says that much of what he has done for and given to the disciples has been "so they may be one." This unity is important not just because it's nice but because it is absolutely necessary to the credibility of their witness.

Jesus' prayer is that the disciples may know God as he knows God, intimately. And that kind of intimate relationship with God is only possible when the believers have an intimate relationship with each other. The ministry of believers is only as strong as the unity they exhibit to the world.

But how far does unity have to go to be genuine?

Must we worship with each other, or is it enough to worship beside each other every once in a while? Must we agree on every point of theology, every jot and tittle of doctrine? What can we do to show the love of God in our unity?

The saying is attributed to John Wesley, "In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, diversity. In all things, charity," but the actual origins of that mantra are lost in history. Whoever said it, it is a good philosophy to follow. The history of the church became a series of divisions when we did not follow this wisdom. The divisions were always a scandal, hurtful and painful.

There are still Protestant communions that will admit to communion only persons formed within the teachings of that denomination. There also remain barriers to sharing communion with Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians.

Jesus calls us to be one so that the world may know that God has sent the only Son so that through Jesus all people might be saved. That was Jesus' final prayer for his disciples.

It seems, sometimes, that people feel that family and country can unify us. Major League Baseball held a Veteran's memorial weekend last weekend. During the sixth inning, the crowds sing God Bless America. Today, I've scheduled America the Beautiful as one of our hymns and, if you listen closely to the lyrics, it is actually a prayer for our country. The Battle Hymn of the Republic is often sung as a patriotic hymn on national holidays, but rather than a nationalistic hymn, it is actually a vision of a greater truth.

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the LORD;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;*

His truth is marching on.

Glory, glory! Hallelujah!

Glory, glory! Hallelujah!

Glory, glory! Hallelujah!

His truth is marching on.

We will only find unity in God. Only Jesus can make us one. and any decision to live as though we want to be more united feels like a step toward living out Jesus' prayer in our daily lives.

That is one of the things for which I am grateful for in the United Methodist Church. As we come to the Communion table, we can remember the words of a song in our Faith We Sing book,

*Come to the table of grace, come to the table of grace.
This is God's table, it's not yours or mine.
Come to the table of grace.*

Our Communion table is open to all people, and it disturbs me when some do not feel welcome. For it is in an open table that we find unity. Communion with Christ is essential because it leads us to being in communion with others. If we love God and if we are communing with God, then this will lead us to loving and communing with our brothers and sisters. If we love God and are communing with God, then we will find God in one another.

We can help bring people to know God and to be in God's presence by shifting from being passive to active by inviting others to church. The oft-repeated phrase for calling disciples in the gospel of John is stunningly simple: "Come and see." Most of us can manage that. "Something wonderful is happening, come and see!" Something wonderful is happening in our church, come and see! It is not up to us to make people come. It is only our responsibility to extend an invitation and to provide hospitality when the invitation is accepted. In doing that, Jesus' prayer can be fulfilled, that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me." (17:23).

Our unity shows people how much God loves the world He created and all things that live thereon and how amazing a united heaven and earth can be.