

Unity Not Uniformity
Acts 15:1-12
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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I have often been aware that as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), some of our greatest strengths are also our greatest challenges.

Our commitment to freedom of belief is one of the topics about which this could be said.

In the early days of the Stone-Campbell movement, the movement out of which we as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) grew, “no creed but Christ” was our unifying call. Our founders, having left churches that required people to agree with creeds and confessions, rooted our movement in freedom of understanding. Individuals were not only allowed, but encouraged, to read and interpret the Bible for themselves and to build a faith on reason. That remains true today.

Meanwhile, unity is also at the core of who we are. “Unity is our polar star,” Barton W. Stone, one of our founders, was known to remind people.

Perhaps it is this both admirable and sometimes difficult relationship between freedom and unity that prompted the denomination a few years ago to create t-shirts that read, “Unity Not Uniformity.”

It makes a good t-shirt slogan...a good bumper sticker. But it can be a difficult reality. After all, unity and diversity can be hard to hold in balance.

That has always been true, but within our lifetimes has likely never been more true than today.

As we see polarization increasing and the lines that divide people getting thicker and stronger, we are left to wonder how in the world do we remain in relationship, how do we remain one church, how do we continue to work for unity when our differences have become deeply divisive?

And, while I would love to offer you one easy answer to that question or one single formula for dealing with differences that would always work, I can not. But, what I find valuable is for us to wonder about this together.

So, how do we hold true to a commitment to freedom of belief and still remain one church together?

Sometimes we do what the leaders of the early church did. Corinne read this story for us of the early leaders, who really understood Christianity as being a Jewish movement, trying to figure out what was required of Gentile converts. While topics like circumcision, especially as a religious practice, may feel foreign to us, still there are things we can learn from this story.

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And those of you who know this story might have noticed that we didn't read the whole thing. We did not read all the way to the conclusion where they come to a decision about what practices they would require and what practices they would set aside. While that is something we also do...sometimes we find a compromise that everyone can come to consensus around...what I don't want us to miss is what happens before that.

Did you notice? The leaders of the early church debated. They discussed. They had, as the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible tells us, "no small dissension."

And they listened.

I wonder if we do any of this enough.

Sometimes I observe that we come to consensus or compromise as a way of avoiding conflict. But this passage reminds us, as does our denominational history with a leader like Alexander Campbell who had passionate both public and private debates, it reminds us that freedom of belief is not about "anything goes." Rather it is about doing the often difficult work of study and prayer *and* conversation in community in order to discover what we believe.

When we do that, sometimes we will find a compromise that really works. Sometimes we will come to true consensus, where even though not everyone gets what they wanted, we are all able to support the result.

I wonder what our life together as a congregation and what the Christian movement in general would be like if we learned how to debate and discuss *and* listen to each other. I wonder if compromise and consensus would come about more often. I wonder how we would look different.

But that doesn't always happen. So, sometimes, unity without uniformity means that we agree to disagree *and* to stay in relationship with each other.

Sometimes it means, as Rev. Terri Hord Owens, our General Minister and President, said last summer at our General Assembly, that we not only *welcome* all to the table but that we *stay* at the table together and remain part of each other.

In Michael Kinnamon's new novel, *The Nominee*, which is based on his own experience as the nominee for General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1991, the main character, Matthew McAvoy, has been nominated to lead the denomination. At one point in the book, speaking to the General Board who would affirm his nomination before it went on to the General Assembly, McAvoy said, "Christians recognize that we belong together not because we think alike or look alike, but because we have all said 'yes' to the One who has graciously welcomed us" (Michael Kinnamon, *The Nominee*, 83).

That is something we, as Disciples, affirm again and again.

We affirm it each week as we say that all are welcome at the table.

We affirm it in acts like baptism where our list of questions is short. "No creed but Christ" is clear as we ask one simple question about belief. The other questions we ask are about living justly in relationship with God and neighbor and about being part of a community as together we strive to follow Jesus. These are action questions that are about staying in the community and working together to do God's will in this world.

But, we know, especially today, that it takes a special kind of commitment to stay in relationship with people from whom we differ greatly. And in our world that seems harder and harder. We have watched in recent years as families and workplaces, friendships and churches, communities and schools have been fractured by an inability to remain in relationship across differences.

And so we wonder...what does it take for us to stay at the table even when the differences are great? Is there work on relationship-building that would help us know how to do this?

And sometimes we wonder if unity is worth it all.

Again returning to Kinnamon's new novel, Matthew McAvoy, a person with a deep commitment to unity, asked, "Aren't there times...when the church needs to risk even its unity for the sake of gospel-based justice? Aren't there false unities, shallow harmonies, that implicitly bolster unjust policies and practices?" (Michael Kinnamon, *The Nominee*, 124).

Friends, being in relationships can be challenging. Being part of a community of unique individuals is challenging. Learning to find our way forward together while recognizing that we are not identical...that is hard. And knowing if and when we can no longer remain together, that is heartbreaking.

And, as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), it is work to which we are called. And it is important and faithful work, work which we are asked to engage with our whole selves.

Perhaps that is the thing our founders most had in mind...that we use our brains as we study scripture and tradition, that we engage our hearts as we seek to live in ways that reflect God's abundant love, that we listen to learn that we might be open to discovering ways our faith might change and grow and expand, and that we do all of this in the midst of relationships, honoring the unique realities of each one's lived experience.

Unity - it is important. And it does not require uniformity. Unity is not even at its best without diversity.

And so we journey on together, to listen, to debate, to learn, to grow, to seek in all that we do to follow in Jesus' ways. Amen.