

Songs of Unity and Connection
John 17:20-24 and Galatians 3:28
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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“Let Christian unity be our polar star”

“Unity not Uniformity.”

These quotes are reminders that for over two hundred years we, as people of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), have held unity close to our hearts. We have worked for unity. We have argued for its importance. We have shaped our practices and beliefs around it. We have claimed it again and again in so many, many ways.

And we have struggled to accomplish it, because even when it is held central in our belief system, is difficult. And, especially if that unity does NOT require uniformity, it means that different people, with different personalities, different preferences, different demeanors, different experiences, different understandings...do you hear the refrain here?

Different - which we celebrate as good - is not always easy when we are trying to be united.

And so, perhaps it should not surprise us that in the Gospel of John we hear Jesus praying not only for the disciples who shared ministry with him and ate at the table with him, but for those who would come after them...and, friends, that means he was praying for us!

Sit with that for a minute. It is no small deal.

The idea that someone, anyone, but maybe especially Jesus, prayed for us long before we existed...that matters. And, I suspect it speaks to both the importance and the challenge of unity. If, according to the writer of the Gospel of John, among Jesus' last concerns was the unity of his followers, then that both means that unity matters and that it doesn't come easy. Rather Jesus knew that we needed God's power and grace in order to find it.

And, boy, wasn't he right?

See, we catch glimpses of unity.

Over the past two weeks, we have seen many. Neighbors and strangers working together to cut and haul trees, clearing roads and driveways, roofs and doorways. We have watched as strangers have connected on social media to pool resources and take food and diapers and other necessities to some of the most hard hit areas. We have seen people across race and politics, age and economics, come together to clean up Iowa and take care of lowans.

But do we have to wait for derechos or tornadoes or floods or fires in order to see people unite around a common cause?

And then there are other glimpses. Nancy Richards has often mentioned that one of the joys of going to Iowa football games is to see all these people - from different walks of life, different backgrounds, different ideas and values - all come together for one common cause. Now, and apologies in advance to season ticket holders, players and coaches, but it can certainly be argued that there are more important things to come together around than the black and gold of Iowa sports.

And yet, is there something that we the church can learn from disaster relief and sports fans?

Because it seems - at least if Jesus' prayer means anything - that unity matters. It matters because unity happens more easily when we see the humanity of others...or maybe it is that when we see the humanity of others it is easier to be united.

I don't know which one leads to the other, but what I do know is that unity and humanity are deeply connected. And that means that the more united we are, the better off we are. Because, when we see another as like us or as part of us or as mattering to us, then we will work for their good in ways we don't tend to do when we demonize and name others as enemy.

And some of that is captured in our verse from Galatians. It reads, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

And, we hear this and we applaud it and we believe it and we embrace it. But, frankly, it's easy to do when this is the language we are hearing. Because most of the categories there don't really mean anything to us in our life and times. Jew and Greek...slave and free... Honestly, we can embrace this text easily because those categories allow us to see it as an ancient problem and to pretend we have solved it.

But what if we put that in language that would challenge us? What if we heard it read, "There is no longer Democrat or Republican...there is no longer cis or trans...there is no longer black or white"? What then? Because I feel certain that at least one of those comparisons makes your stomach flop a bit...at least one of them causes a reaction deep within you that says, "But I'm not like them."

And we also need to remember that this statement is not about losing identity, not about becoming color blind or pretending to be something you are not. We know well how important it is to acknowledge the fact that being black in the United States is more dangerous than being white. We know well how important it is to acknowledge that being female in United States means that you are likely to make, on average, 81.6 cents for every dollar your male counterpart makes, and sometimes much less than that. (<https://www.businessinsider.com/gender-wage-pay-gap-charts-2017-3#the-gender-wage-gap-varies-widely-depending-on-the-state-1>)

So, this isn't about setting aside the differences and distinctions that make us wonderful nor forgetting to talk about those that disadvantage some among us. But, it is about finding a commonality, a humanity, a love that binds us together so that even when a disaster hasn't hit or, as has become our reality in COVID times, it isn't a football Saturday with a full stadium, still we can find common purpose, common ground, and be united for the common good.

But, friends, this is hard work. And sometimes it seems impossible. So, what do we do?

I have to be honest. I have no magic answers. I don't know that I'm any better at this than you are.

But I do think that the Gospel of John gives us a place to begin. And that place is in relationship with God. That place is one of openness and connection as we allow ourselves to be made better by Jesus, who we claim to follow.

I hear this scripture and I am reminded of the book *The Shack*. In it, the main character, Mack, experiences a life-changing tragedy when his child is kidnapped and murdered. His pain becomes a companion that distances him from everyone who matters to him until one weekend he encounters God, in the form of three surprising persons. At some point during the weekend, he inquires about the concept of the Trinity asking questions about their relationship, the hierarchy, how it works and why it even matters.

In the answer, given by the one Mack calls Papa, who he meets as a "beaming African-American woman" (*The Shack*, 82), Mack is told that there are three of them because of love and relationship. Papa says, "All love and relationship is possible for you only because it already exists within Me, within God myself" (*The Shack*, 101).

Regardless of what you understand or believe about the Trinity, there is something beautiful about the picture of God knowing love because relationship exists within God. And that is what we are invited into...into relationship with God, with Jesus, with Spirit, with the divine...and through that relationship, invited into loving unity with all humanity.

It has not been easy. And it likely will not be easy tomorrow. It may get harder before it gets easier. But, it is our invitation.

And perhaps the song we sang, as we work for unity, is our prayer: "Make us one, Lord, make us one. Holy Spirit, make us one. Let your love flow so the world will know we are one in you."

Amen.