

Unity – It Is Who We Are
John 17:20-26
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Unity. It seems to be one of the most difficult things for humans to achieve, sometimes even to talk about. We seem far better at divisiveness and disunity.

There are many illustrations of this including a 2019 Pew Research study that showed that both Republicans and Democrats view members of the other party as significantly more closed-minded than other Americans ([Most Republicans and Democrats view each other as more closed-minded than other Americans | Pew Research Center](#)).

Whether we are judging characteristics like closed-mindedness and open-mindedness, or deciding to reduce people to one opinion or demographic detail, we don't have to look very far in our life and times to find evidence of great division.

And yet unity is at the core of who we are as members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In fact, the Stone-Campbell movement, out of which we grew, was intended not to produce another denomination (or group of denominations). Rather we began as a movement for Christian unity with, as Barton Stone said, unity as our “polar star.”

But the desire for unity did not begin some 200 years ago with Barton Stone and Thomas & Alexander Campbell, our denomination's founders. Rather, Jesus was praying for unity among his followers, not just those he knew, but those who would come later. Jesus was praying for us, and every other Christian across time and space, even before we existed.

And if we are honest, some of the easiest places to point to a *lack* of unity are among Christians. It was a running joke in a community in which I previously served that every time a Baptist church would get a new color of carpet in the sanctuary, a new Baptist church would be born. And if seemingly like-minded Christians can't find their way through a decision to change the carpet and remain unified, then our problems might be bigger than even Jesus ever imagined.

But maybe the place to begin is with the word “unity.”

How would you define it? How do you use that word in your day to day life? What do you think of when you hear “unity”?

When I asked the Bible study group how they would define “unity” they said things that we commonly hear and think of, things like:

- Working together toward a common goal

- Caring about each other
- Having common ground or a shared vision
- Working as a unit, as one
- Feeling safe, supported and loved

But do an internet search on the definition of unity and you might find this: The state of being united or joined as a whole.

Perhaps we don't immediately hear the difference, but what if the way we think about unity is part of the problem?

After all, the first definitions I shared were all dependent upon relationships with each other, compassion for each other, commitment to each other. But, the simple definition that an internet search offers is dependent upon none of those. It is simply a state of being, a reality of being part of the same whole...with or without our commitment or maybe even acknowledgement.

Yes, I do believe that God desires deep and compassionate relationships. I do believe that God cares about how we care for one another. I do believe what Jesus says in this prayer - that the relationship he has with God is a model for all relationships, something he wants for all of us.

Meanwhile, I suspect that all too often we are waiting to feel good about one another before we acknowledge our commonality. We are waiting to like each other before we choose to work together for the common good. We are waiting to want to be together before we look someone different from us in the eye and acknowledge their humanity.

What if rather than waiting to feel it, we simply lived it? What if we found ways to acknowledge our connection which isn't dependent upon us but is gifted to us through Jesus? What if in this acknowledgement we discovered that knowing we are connected gives us a greater capacity to care?

While our denomination is certainly flawed and has been throughout its history, what I appreciate is that our founders knew that there were things that held Christians together beyond their baptism and communion practices, beyond their understandings of this piece of scripture or that. They knew, even when being in the room with each other was difficult, that unity wasn't a human project but a reality proclaimed and ordained by God whether we acknowledge it or not.

As Lucy Lind Hogan wrote, "We are one in Christ whether we agree with each other or not. We are one in Christ whether we like one another or not. To become a part of Christ is to become a part of the community; a part of the one" ([Commentary on John 17:20-26 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)).

And sometimes we find places where we live this reality. Haven't we all sat around a table, perhaps at our grandparents' house over the holidays, and looked around the

room and wondered how in the world we were connected to all these people? And then we prayed together and filled our plates and spent the afternoon laughing and sometimes arguing as we learned again what family is.

Friends, as someone said in Bible study last week, we are in a time when the differences weigh heavier than they have, perhaps in any of our lives before. And meanwhile, still - with or without our acknowledgement, across a great variety of understandings and practices and opinions, even across deep and wide divisions - still in Christ we are one.

The 1984 movie *Places in the Heart* is set in 1930's Texas and tells the story of Edna Spaulding, a widow with two young children, who with the help of two unexpected people tries to run her 40 acre farm. Throughout the film stories are told of human struggles - unfaithfulness in marital relationships; deaths caused by accidents and natural disasters as well as those rootedness in the hatred of racism; people with little in common coming together with a common goal; the challenge of setting aside negative feelings and even simple assumptions.

The movie ends with a scene in the local church. Community members are together listening as the scripture is read and the choir sings. Then as communion begins, as trays are passed from one person to another, the pews grow fuller with those who were absent being shown receiving and handing off the communion trays. There in those pews sit children and adults, an adulterer as well as both his wife and mistress, KKK members as well as both a teenager they lynched and a man they ran out of town, the living and the dead. This scene doesn't happen in real life, rather it is only in this cinematic, ethereal closing that we see the fullness of God's kin-dom. Here we see a picture of what Jesus' prayer looks like, a picture of people torn apart by the divisions of this world, finding their common identity as children of God welcomed to Christ's table.

There is no easy way to get there, but in Jesus' prayer we hear the hope. And we are reminded that Christian unity is happening with or without us, sometimes in spite of us. It invites us to get onboard . It doesn't ask us all to agree but it does ask that we look in the eyes of the other and see God's beloved child. May it be so.