

John 17:20-26  
May 8, 2016

“Prayer for Unity with Intimacy”

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Two men are standing on a bridge, one is about to jump off and the other is trying to talk him out of it. So the man starts a conversation with the jumper, "So are you a Christian?" The jumper replies, "Yes."

The man asks, "Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox?" The jumper says, "Protestant." The man replies, "Me too! What denomination?" The jumper, "Baptist"

The man replies, "Me too! Southern Baptist or Northern Baptist?" The jumper says, "Northern Baptist."

The man replies, "Wow, Me too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?" The jumper answers, "Northern Conservative Baptist."

The man now stunned says, "Me too!" and asks, "Northern Conservative Baptist council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist council of 1912?" The jumper replies, "Northern Conservative Baptist Council of 1912."

The man then says, "Really...? You Heretic," and pushes the jumper off the bridge.

Today our scripture reading is in flashback mode, in the Church we are celebrating the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday in the season of Easter, but our readings take us back before the crucifixion to Jesus' final evening with his disciples. Today we hear part of Jesus' final prayer; he prays for the unity of his believers, "that they may all be one." And he prays for his believers to share intimacy with each other, and with God, "as you are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us." But even in our own history we know unity and intimacy are quickly broken.

In 1937 the German Evangelical Synod of North America merged with the Dutch Reformed Church, predecessors to the United church of Christ; and the Pastor of this church, Emanuel, could not accept the merger. He left Emanuel Church and took a majority of the congregation. The minority who remained were many of the same families who had originally founded Emanuel in 1888.

The two groups began a heated dispute over who owned the property at 10627 W. Forest Home Ave. The matter wasn't settled until 3 years later in a 1940 Wisconsin State Supreme Court decision which ruled in favor of the founding families. The pastor and the other group moved just northeast of us to found Whitnall Park Lutheran Church.

20 years later, in 1957, when the United Church of Christ formed as a denomination, our ancestors selected a portion of Jesus' prayer to become a permanent part of our national

church symbol. If I can invite you to reach into the envelope racks on the back of the pew in front of you, and take out a Welcome card you will see this logo.

The orb is a symbol that our faith is to be lived in the day to day world. The cross with a crown on top of the Orb, symbolizes our trust that Christ as the king of the world, and the circle around the outside contains our denomination's name, and Jesus' prayer from our story today, John 17, "that they may all be one." The UCC was the first Christian denomination to 'unite' different churches since the United States was settled. In the early settlement days of this country denominationalism spread like wildfire.

Christians splintered into separate denominations due to irreconcilable differences over doctrine, history, cultural and ethnic background, liturgy, sacraments, biblical interpretation, sanctuary architecture and so much more. In 2006, the Yearbook of United States and Canadian churches counted at least 217 different denominations.

So I think Jesus talks about two things in our story today. He talks very clearly about Christian unity, he prays to God on behalf not only of his followers back then, but he says, "also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." That's us, and all the generations after the disciples who will come to follow Christ.

So unity is an important theme. But Jesus also talks about Intimacy with God and one another. It's there in the somewhat awkward phrase Jesus says in his prayer, "As you are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us..." It's a hope for all of us to continually seek intimacy with God and Jesus, and all Jesus' followers.

One definition of sin is separation; separating ourselves from God, and from one another. So in light of our "sins" of division, let me offer some hope and healing.

For many years Emanuel Church shares an annual Thanksgiving Eve Service with Whitnall Park Lutheran Church. The service is designed and led by both pastors, the venue switches each year. The Music Directors and combined Choirs of our two congregations all participate. A few years ago we tried to open that service up to have wider participation from other congregations in the community, but afterward Pastor Mike Fazio of Whitnall Park and I evaluated and decided to return to our two congregations as the primary planning and leadership team. While others are always welcome we felt combining the worship and fellowship time that follows continues to be an important witness by our congregations to healing the divide that is nearly 80 years past now. It is an important witness to the Hales Corners Community of how divisions can be healed, and sins can be forgiven. This is unity with Intimacy that doesn't require us all to be alike.

Secondly, you may be aware October 2017 is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the date in which Priest and Monk Martin Luther is supposed to have nailed the 95 thesis on the door of the Church at Wittenberg, Germany. Though his hope was to reform the Roman Church, what resulted was

one of the deepest divides within Christianity giving birth to the Protestant Reformation, and carrying ramifications for hundreds of years.

In anticipation of this anniversary which divided the church and as an act of Christian unity with intimacy, St. Alphonsus Catholic Church in Greendale, whose Priests and parish leaders have long been active participants in the SW clergy group which also includes Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, UCC'ers and more, St. Al's has taken the lead in gathering our group to organize an ecumenical mission project! The idea is for people in all our diverse churches to set aside a fall Saturday which will include a morning gathering for prayer, a sending to various 'work sites' to work shoulder to shoulder with people of other Christian churches, and conclude with a celebration meal so people can share their stories. Thrivent Financial Services (*which used to be called Lutheran Brotherhood*) is underwriting nearly \$5000 dollars for the materials, the meal and other costs.

Unity does not mean uniformity, but it does call Christians to closeness and friendship. It means Jesus' heart is large enough for all of us.

I want to close with a poem I came across in my reading...

May your people be one as the seas are one, though salting a thousand shores. May your people be one as the wind is one, though whisper, though rush, though roar. May your people be one as the birds are one, though they sing a thousand songs. May your people be one as our prayers are one, though voiced in a thousand tongues. May your people be one, as the light is one, though made of the colors of the rainbow.

May your people be one as your love is one – your love for all people, known and unknown. May your people be one as you are one: you in Christ, and Christ in you. May your people be one as the Spirit is one, moving in us, moving through.

Amen