

Easter 7 C Sermon
John 17:20-26
May 29, 2022

“The (Pipe) Dream of Unity”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

‘I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, God, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. God, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous God, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.’

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There’s an old folktale that goes something like this:

A certain father had a family of sons, who were forever quarreling among themselves. No words he could say did the least good, so he cast about in his mind for some very striking example that should make them see that discord would lead them to misfortune.

One day when the quarreling had been much more violent than usual and each of the sons was moping in a surly manner, he asked one of them to bring him a bundle of sticks. Then handing the bundle to

each of his sons in turn he told them to try to break it. But although each one tried his best, none was able to do so.

The father then untied the bundle and gave the sticks to his sons to break one by one. This they did very easily.

“My sons,” said the father, “do you not see how certain it is that if you agree with each other and help each other, it will be impossible for your enemies to injure you? But if you are divided among yourselves, you will be no stronger than a single stick in that bundle.”¹

I suspect that Jesus understood the simple lesson of this story: division leads to weakness and unity, to strength. Many of us recognize his words from this morning’s text. Though we may not be able to place them in their context, we’ve heard them before. This is his famed Prayer for Oneness and the motto of the United Church of Christ: “That they may all be one”.

It may seem a little strange for the seventh Sunday of Easter, but this text is actually set on the night Jesus was betrayed—on Maundy Thursday. In fact, these are the last recorded words of Jesus in John’s gospel before Judas leads the guards to arrest him in the garden. We get the sense that Jesus knew that this little group of friends was about to be torn apart. “I ask,” Jesus prays, “that they may all be one . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me.” I wonder, what does this oneness Jesus prayed for look like for his followers?

Did you know, there are more than 200 Christian denominations in North America alone with estimates as high as 45,000 denominations around the world?² What could account for all these different Christian

¹ “The Bundle of Sticks, Aesop for Children,” Fabelsofaesop.com, <https://fablessofaesop.com/the-father-his-sons-and-the-bundle-of-sticks.html>.

² Donavyn Coffey. “Why does Christianity have so many denominations?” Livescience.com, February 27, 2021, <https://www.livescience.com/christianity-denominations.html>.

communions? Well, denominations formed for a variety of reasons ranging from King Henry the VIII's break with the Roman Catholic Church in England, to the Protestant Reformation in Germany, to the Civil War in the U.S., to disagreements on church governance, interpretation of scripture, who can become clergy, and so many other things. And while disagreements don't always lead to the formation of a new denomination, they sometimes do lead to local congregations fracturing and splitting over sometimes petty things. One actual church consultant compiled a list of his "favorite" church conflicts. Here are some of them:

1. An argument over the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard.
2. A fight over whether or not to build a children's playground or to use the land for a cemetery.
3. A church dispute over whether or not to install restroom stall dividers in the women's restroom.
4. A fight over which picture of Jesus to put in the foyer.
5. A petition to have all church staff clean shaven.
6. A dispute over whether the worship leader should have his shoes on during the service.
7. A dispute in the church because the Lord's Supper had cran-grape juice instead of grape juice.
8. A disagreement over using the term "potluck" instead of "pot blessing"
9. An argument on whether the church should allow deviled eggs at the church meal
10. A fight over whether or not to sing "Happy Birthday" each week.
11. Two different churches reported fights over the type of coffee. In one of the churches, they moved from Folgers to a stronger Starbucks brand. In the other church, they simply moved to a stronger blend. Members left the church in the latter example.³

³ Thom Ranier. "Twenty Five Silly Things Church Members Fight Over," Thomranier.com, November 11, 2015, <https://thomrainer.com/2015/11/twenty-five-silly-things-church-members-fight-over/>.

When working with people, we all know to expect differences of opinion. Sometimes such differences become heated disagreements, and sometimes those disagreements lead to a parting of ways. Surely Jesus understood this as well. And yet, the Jesus of John's gospel prays for unity. "I ask," he prays, "that they may all be one . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me." I wonder, what does this oneness Jesus prayed for look like for his followers?

For much of the past 2000 years, the church has equated Christian unity with conformity—conformity to a set of beliefs about God and about Jesus and about the Church itself. Unity was mistaken for uniformity—if we all believe the same things, we'll be united in the ministry that grows out of those common beliefs. Truthfully, though, that's never really worked all that well. As issues arose that challenged those beliefs, the Church fractured and split and divided. When unity is mistaken for uniformity, for conformity, that's what happens. But you know what? I think all these denominational splits and divisions are okay. I think it's okay that there are over 200 denominations in North America and 45,000 denominations around the world.

Jesus did not teach and preach and heal and eventually to die to give birth to a movement of conformists—he was kinda the ultimate rebel! Jesus taught and preached and healed and died to give birth to a movement that would change the world by loving and living and serving like he did; by challenging conformity to a status quo that protected the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor and the marginalized; by scouring the edges of community to bring to the center those who society deemed to be of little worth; and by empowering ordinary people to carry on his work when he was gone.

Christian unity, as Jesus would have envisioned, could not have been about conformity to a set of beliefs or the uniformity of the institutional church. Christian unity as Jesus would have envisioned would have been a unity of purpose—to make divinity real to the world by living and loving and serving like Jesus; by challenging an unjust status quo; by bringing

those who are marginalized or cast out into community; by empowering ordinary people to continue Jesus' work. That kind of unity *is* strength and wherever people are doing that in the world today, they are truly one with Jesus. They are the answer to his prayer.

In recent days, though, I've had to wonder if this kind of unity—a unity of purpose—can really even be possible. Or, if Jesus' dream of unity is little more than a pipe dream. Politicians can't come together in any meaningful way, even in the wake of terrible and tragic loss, to serve the public good. Christians can't unite in any meaningful way to bear witness to the peace, justice, and community that Jesus taught, preached, and died for. Neighbors can't unite in any meaningful way to attest to the inherent value of human life regardless of that life's color, gender, country of origin, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation. Countries can't unite in any meaningful way to bear witness to that "more perfect union" we claim to stand for. Is Jesus' dream of unity just a pipe dream? I don't want to believe that it is, but I'm not seeing much evidence that it isn't. Once again, I think the burden of proof falls to us.

I know you must get tired, coming to church week after week and leaving with homework assignments. But if not us, who? If not now, when? We are the ones to show our community and our world that unity is more than a pipe dream. We are the ones to show what is really possible when diverse people come together with a common goal for the sake of the common good. We are the ones to show that a status quo of roadblocks, mudslinging, and infighting are not the way forward. And now is the time to the time to do it because tomorrow is guaranteed to no one.

"I ask," Jesus prays, "that they may all be one . . . so that the world may know that you have sent me." May we too be one with Jesus and with one another, for the sake of uniting our human family and our world behind a common purpose of peace, justice, and community. May it be so. Amen.