

That They May Become One in Your Hand

Ezekiel 37:15-28; John 17:8-11

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This is something I believe more and more passionately as I age: there is only one Church in Huntsville. Just one. It has many names: Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Orthodox, Assembly of God, and many others. Some meet in services that are characterized by order, where you pretty much know what's going to happen. Occasionally the Spirit might slip something in that's not printed in the bulletin, but not normally. Others meet in services that have no discernable order. They last for hours, and only God knows what's going to happen. Some are pretty straight-laced, with clearly defined and orthodox beliefs. Others are seekers, quite eager to toss out orthodoxy if it does not meet the test of real life. Most meet in buildings with architectural symbolism that stretches back hundreds and even thousands of years. But others meet in homes. One in our community meets at the YMCA. One of the newest churches in our town meets in a bar. I'll bet they don't have any trouble with church growth!

The purpose of the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is affirm that despite all our differences, the various shades and hues of Christian community, despite even those issues that sometimes cause disagreement, there is only one Church. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and father of us all, the Apostle Paul reminds us. Let us never lose sight of that.

Christians in Korea have given us this year's theme for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity—*that they may become one in your hand*. They take it from the book of Ezekiel, and understanding the history of Korea makes it most meaningful. Their culture is ancient, stretching back more than 2,000 before the birth of Christ. For some 5,000 years, Korea maintained itself as a racially homogenous people. In recent history, though, Korea has struggled with internal conflicts over ideologies. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, based on Communist ideology, formed in the north of Korea. The Republic of Korea, based on democracy and freedom, formed in the south of Korea. These conflicting ideologies reached their

tipping point in the early 1950s with the Korean War. An armistice was signed in 1953, and a border between North and South Korea divided the one country into two lands, two kingdoms, we might say. Sadly as many as 10 million families became divided by a wall and a demilitarized zone that stretches the width of the nation. Many families do not know if their family members on the other side are alive or not. Grief hangs above almost every family. The wall that divides their country is a deep wound in the pride and identity of the Korean people.

This year Christian leaders in Korea lift before their people and the entire Body of Christ a vision from the prophet Ezekiel, a vision of the power of God to bring unity out of division. They see compelling parallels between the division in their own land and the division that existed in the land of Israel. It was a dark time for Ezekiel and his people. They too were a nation divided into two lands, two kingdoms. The northern kingdom was called Israel, and the southern kingdom Judah. The prophets charged that the people turned their backs on God and worshiped the stone and wooden idols of their neighboring countries. One of those neighboring countries, Babylon, invaded in the year 587 BC. Their armies devoured the land, destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, and took most of the people of Israel into exile.

It was in exile in Babylon that the prophet Ezekiel saw the vision recorded in our text. Ezekiel saw two pieces of wood, two sticks. On one was carved the name of the tribe Judah, identifying that piece of wood with the southern kingdom of Israel. On the other piece of wood was carved the name of the tribe Joseph, identifying it with the northern kingdom of Israel. Now listen to what God commanded Ezekiel to do with those two sticks: “join them together into one stick,” God said, “so *that they may become one in your hand.*”

Ezekiel did so. The two sticks—one representing the northern kingdom and the other representing the southern kingdom—became one piece of wood in his hand. The people, of course, wanted to know what this meant. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God spoke these words to the people,

I will take my people from their exile in Babylon, bring them home, and make them one nation again. Never again shall they be two nations. Never again shall they be divided into two

kingdoms. I will cleanse them, and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (paraphrased)

For the divided, exiled, and demoralized people of Israel, this was a wonderful message of hope. It wasn't about what they could do. They were experiencing what they could do. It wasn't about what the prophet Ezekiel could do. Eloquent though he may have been, he too was only a man. This vision of reunification was about what God could do. God could bring reconciliation. God could bring unity. God could heal the divided, exiled, and demoralized people of Israel.

I can see why this vision means so much to the people of Korea.

Today we look at this text through Christian eyes. We see two other pieces of wood. They too were put together by God. They formed a cross, and upon that cross, the very Son of God himself died. In that event upon those two pieces of wood, God reconciled the world unto himself. From all the disparity of the world—divisions of race, culture, language, ideology, gender, age, wealth—from all that disparity, God created one family and named it Church. Not Presbyterian Church, not Baptist Church, not Catholic Church. Those are our names. God named us simply Church. And God's desire was and is that we be one. This is what our Lord prayed on the eve of his ascension to that cross:

Holy Father, protect them in your name..., so that they may be one, as we are one.

Do you know what this reminds me of? The family reunions when I was a child. I hope you still have family reunions. Unfortunately, we don't. But I sure remember how, once a year, all the Freemans made it a priority to gather at my great aunt's home in Piedmont, Alabama. We came from all around Alabama and parts of Georgia. Not everyone was named Freeman, of course, but everyone was connected to that name. This was before air conditioning became popular in Piedmont, so everything was outside. Table after table of food. Fried chicken and ham. Casseroles of every sort imaginable. And desserts! Tables devoted just to desserts. Everyone would eat until they couldn't eat any more. The kids would poke their bellies out to prove they had eaten a hearty meal. One of my aunts always brought fried pies. Oh, I'm not even going to get into it!

There would be stories, laughter, and news about new babies, deaths, who's been in the hospital. Quietly the adults would speculate about who might not make it until next year. They whispered about my Uncle Bud. He drinks, you know. And he's been divorced—again! That thing with him this year must be twenty years his junior. We sure wish he wouldn't use that salty language, especially when the children are around. But we didn't care. We were having too much fun playing. Not video games! No, this was back when kids really played. With sticks and balls. With each other. Along the creek. We rolled in the grass. We played hide-and-seek. It was great.

Family reunions were a wonderful thing. We would spend the day together, renew bonds of love, hear the old family stories again, and then leave to try to honor the name we bore.

I'll say it again. There's just one Church, one Christian family. In Korea, here, and around the world, we all belong to one big family of faith. Not everyone shares the same last name, but everyone has a connection back to that name. We don't all live in the same house. Our houses dot the city. Indeed, they dot the world, but that doesn't prevent us from being family. And, of course, we all have an Uncle Bud. If he doesn't belong anywhere else, he belongs here. His new girlfriend too. Ours is a family of grace. Our children play and grow up here. They learn our stories and know that they are loved.

The Sunday of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a kind of family reunion. We spend the day together, renew bonds of love, hear the family stories again, and then we leave to try to honor the name we bear. We leave with a conviction deep within our souls—that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and father of us all. And we leave with a prayer upon our lips: *that we may be one in your hand.*

Closing Prayer

Lord, as you reconciled the world unto yourself, help us to be agents of reconciliation. Make us one in your hand.. Amen.