

The Church as an Oasis of Unity

Psalm 97; John 17:20-26

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“Americans are divided over everything except division,” read the title of an article late last year from NBC News. It seems the only thing we can agree upon these days is that we are divided. Here’s a quote: “Across a broad collection of groups — Democrats and Republicans, urban and rural people, Clinton voters and Trump voters — more than 70 percent say the nation is mainly or totally divided.” (October 21, 2018)

It certainly feels that way.

This may sound naive, but I believe it to be true. Jesus envisioned the church being an oasis of unity in the midst of all this division. He even prayed for our unity—that we would be completely one—in John 17.

Let me pause a moment and say just a word about this very important chapter and its context in the Gospel of John. Since the Sixteenth Century, this chapter, which is a prayer by Jesus, has been called “Jesus’ high priestly prayer.” It is the final scene in Jesus’ farewell comments to his disciples. It occurred on Thursday evening in the last week of Jesus’ life. He was in Jerusalem, of course, and at the end of this evening, Judas betrayed him into the hands of those who crucified him. Throughout the evening, he gave his disciples some of his most memorable teachings. He washed their feet and told them that they should wash each others’ feet. He gave them a new commandment, saying that they were to love one another the way he loved them. If they would do that, he said, people would know that they were his disciples. He told them that he was going away and that he would prepare a place for them. He assured them that he would come again to take them to that place. He promised that they would not be left orphaned, that the Holy Spirit would be their comforter. Wonderful teachings!

At the end of this intimate evening of teachings, Jesus prayed the high priestly prayer of John 17. It is, in my opinion, a glimpse into the heart of our Lord. But be aware of this. As Jesus prayed, somewhere in the darkness

men with swords and torches were marching to arrest him. Judas would soon betray him with a kiss. His disciples were visibly anxious, feeling the palpable danger of the evening. So Jesus prayed. He prayed for himself. He prayed for his disciples. And near the end of his prayer, he prayed for you and me and all others who would follow him. These are the words of our Lord,

I ask not only on behalf of these (referring to his disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me though their word (referring to subsequent believers, including us), that they may all be one.... 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.

Can there be any doubt in anyone's mind as to how Jesus felt about the unity of his followers? At this critical moment in his life—soldiers marching, disciples wringing their hands—Jesus prayed that we would be “completely one,” even as he and the Father were one. And let's be honest; we're not. We are Catholics and Protestants. We are Presbyterians and Methodists, Episcopalians and Church of God, Lutherans and Baptists. We are Evangelicals and Charismatics. We are blacks and whites. We are conservatives and liberals. We are everything but completely one. We raise suspicions about the truthfulness of the others. We question their genuineness and authority. Regrettably, the church today reflects the divisions of our culture rather than the oneness for which our Lord prayed. We have imposed our stubborn will over the loving will of Christ, and as a result we are not an oasis of unity.

So what can we do about it? Of course, we cannot control what happens in other churches, but we can control what happens in our church and in our hearts. Let us do that and be the change we want to see occur. Here are a few suggestions.

First, we can affirm that there is really only one Church. That one Church is very large, meets in many places, and has many names. We call it Baptist. Others call it Catholic or something else. We each have our own peculiarities. One baptizes this way and another that way. Some prefer order in worship while others prefer ardor in worship. Some are tightly organized, while others just flow with the Spirit. Nevertheless, let us affirm

there is only one Church without calling into question the truthfulness of others.

Second, we must desire unity more than we desire to be right. This is difficult because some beliefs must not be compromised. But those beliefs that must not be compromised are normally not the ones that divide us. We tend to divide over questions of form, not substance. Will we baptize this way or that way? Will the clergy be able to marry or not? Will women be allowed to preach the gospel or not? Will we welcome the gay community or not? We must desire unity more than we desire to be right and refuse to allow questions of form to divide us.

And third, we must re-capture the spirit of that Thursday night. When we read about that night—Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, his teachings about love and the Holy Spirit—it is clear that they were one. There was no competition. No suspicion. There was unity around the One who told them this: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” He told them that, and then he did it. He laid down his life for them. That is the spirit the Church must re-capture.

Until we do, we will reflect the division of the world. Until we do, our witness will suffer. Until we do, we don’t have to wonder what Jesus would think. We know. So followers of Jesus, regardless of brand, let us work together for understanding, mutual respect, reconciliation, and peace. In this terribly divided world, let us be an oasis of unity.

It can start here, at this table, a table that reminds us of the love and faithfulness of our Lord. Before we come to the table of our Lord, let us confess our sins. A Prayer of Confession is printed in your worship guide.