

A Different Kind of Unity

A story is told about a young lad who strayed from his home in a small town in Maine. It was a cold day and snow was falling. When the parents discovered that the child was missing, they first began to search for him in the homes of neighbors and friends. When he could not be found within the limits of the town, they began to search for him in the neighboring fields and woods. After a while, the entire population became alarmed and all were eager to help. They ran around frantically in all directions, calling the boy's name, but their search was fruitless. When a wise man saw what was happening, he summoned the people and said, "This will never do. Let's organize this search properly and we are bound to succeed. Let us all join hands and march through the fields and woods and we will find the child." When they did as they were told, they came upon a pile of snow. They brushed aside the snow and found the frozen body of the lost child. The heartbroken parents cried out in grief, "Oh, if we had joined hands earlier!" (From a sermon by Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson citing Rabbi Bernard L. Berzon, "Miketz-Brotherhood," www.jr.co.il/books/rberzon/styr016.htm)

This story demonstrates how unity or the lack of unity in not only the goal but also the effort affects a community. When people come together for a common goal, it is just as important to have a common effort as it is to have the goal. If people are disorganized and running around in all directions, then the likelihood of reaching the goal diminishes to a point where they would have to get 'lucky' to meet the goal. But time and time again, we see instances of success when people set aside their differences and work together for a common goal whether it is in the search for a missing person, a sports team vying for a championship, a nation looking for security from its enemies, or a religious group seeking to live out its collective calling. There is a synergy when people are united in both the goal and the way to reach that goal.

When people talk about unity within the church, they will cite today's verses from John's Gospel. When we think of unity, we think of people not only having the same goal, but also agreeing on the way to reach that goal. There are no differences, there is no room for disagreement. We usually think of the motto of the Three Musketeers when we think of unity - "All for one and one for all!" After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, the country united behind the president. If anyone said anything that was contrary to what the president said, they were labeled as un-patriotic. Out of fear, the president was given carte blanche to do things the way he saw fit, no discussion, no thought of alternative courses of action. This is the type of unity that the "world" knows and gives us. This type of unity has persisted today - 'either you agree with me or if you don't, then you do not have a right to voice opposition.'

I'm not certain that this is the type of unity that Jesus meant. Last week, we heard Jesus tell His disciples, "**Peace I leave to you, my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives**" (John 14:27a). Jesus is saying that the peace that He gives to us is different than the kind of peace that the world offers us. Also, we can find other scriptural references where we are reminded that God's ways are different than our ways. So, if Jesus gives us a peace that is different from what we know from our perspective, we could also conclude that He wants a unity different from our definition of unity.

So, if this is the case, then what kind of unity could Jesus be talking about? To get a glimpse into the kind of unity that Jesus desires, we can start by looking at His ministry to others. As we have seen, Jesus did not have any prequalifying conditions that people had to meet before He helped them. Jesus saw a need and out of love and compassion, He acted. When Jesus told the disciples that if they loved Him then they would obey and follow His words. So, it would appear that Jesus is also asking God to grant us unity; but a unity that is on His terms and not the world's.

In His prayer, Jesus prays for the kind of unity that He shares with His Father. To understand this type of unity, we can look at the ancient Greek concept of best friends. Best friends would think alike and act alike (almost like the cousins on the Patty Duke show of the 1960's). To people outside of the friendship, it would appear that the two individuals were one. While best friends may disagree between themselves, this disagreement does not adversely affect the friendship and they settle their differences. Neither one has the 'upper hand' in the friendship and either one could be convinced to do something by the other. It is in this type of unity that the Son can convince the Father that He should be sent to earth to save the world through His sacrificial death. It is this type of unity that bonds the parties together in such a way as they appear to be one to those outside of this unity.

While this kind of unity would change how we interact with each other, it does not necessarily mean that denominationalism should be eliminated. As Paul points out in his letter to the Corinthians, there are many members to the one body. Each of the individual members are needed to make the body whole, to make it complete. We can apply this to the church on all levels - the congregation, the denomination and to the entire body of Christian believers. No one part is more important than the other; each part has its function within the body. What unites the different body parts is the head, for us that is Jesus Christ. The unity comes when we work together, each doing our part to achieve what the head, what Jesus wants us to achieve. It is like the people of the town in the story at the beginning, once they set aside their difference, focused on what they had in common and acted that way, then they were able to do what they had set out to do. When we act as one body, acting the way that Jesus wants us to act then we achieve the establishment of God's kingdom here on earth. To do that, we need to set aside our differences, believe that Jesus Christ is our head and trust that the Holy Spirit will lead us to act. When a person is hungry

or naked or troubled or facing injustices, it does not matter to them what the difference is between transubstantiation and a real presence; it does not matter what color a book of worship is; it does not matter what the exact words of Jesus were; what matters most is that someone loves them, giving them hope that their situation will not last and that their needs will somehow be met. This is what Jesus did during His ministry on earth and it is what we should be doing today.

John's Gospel can sometimes be hard to understand and read. The phrasing can be difficult with words being repeated, making it seem like Jesus is talking in circles or in a code of some sort. But when we get past all of that, then we can see a theology that is based on God's love and compassion for people. We also see that there is an equality among people, not because they agree to all the same things, but because God sees them as the same, not only despite their differences, but sometimes because of those differences. When we can have a unity despite our differences with our sisters and brothers in Christ and work out of love and compassion for others, then the world will know that we are Christians by our love.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/KPiK4U4Y4TE>

Service: <https://youtu.be/pkw65qQ5FsE>