

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Sunday, May 8, 2016
All Here

The first verse of today's text from the Gospel of John - "*That they may all be one.*" (John 17:21) - is the scripture used as the motto for the United Church of Christ (UCC). This prayer was important to Jesus and to his disciples; to all who came to follow Jesus down through the ages; and especially to those who worked for the mergers that resulted in the United Church of Christ; and I, believe, to us today.

This line of text, spoken by Jesus, is known as his farewell prayer. In the Gospel of John, it immediately precedes the betrayal of Jesus by Judas. Today's texts, as recorded by the author of John, have increased meaning since they are the last teaching words and spiritual support that Jesus spoke to his disciples. In chapters 14 and 15 that precede it, Jesus seems to be making sure that what he may have said previously in parables and may have not been completely understood by the disciples now must be understood more clearly. Jesus demonstrates intensity to his purpose at this time. The critical message he wants to make sure is understood by the disciples is the oneness that exists between he and God. In chapter 14, verse 9b Jesus says, "*One who has seen me has seen God.*"

The purpose Jesus had for his disciples understanding this oneness between he and God is contained in verse 21: "*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*". Jesus wants the disciples to know that he and God are one, and that, therefore, they are one with God.

This is a simple, yet powerful message, critical to our understanding of Jesus. The purpose of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection is for his disciples - and for all those who followed his disciples and for all those of us who follow Jesus today - to understand that we are one with God - to diminish the importance of our differences and to increase the power of our oneness. The second part of verse 21 emphasizes not only the oneness with God; but that all who are one with Jesus have also experienced Jesus' love for them, so also they can experience being loved by God. Biblical Commentator, Peter J. B. Carman says: "*The purpose of Jesus' prayer is unity not for its own sake, but for the sake of witness to the love of God and the authenticity of Christ as the one "sent."* It is a prayer needed as much in the divided and fragmented world of twenty-first-century Christianity as in the churches of the first centuries after Christ."¹

Our second text from the Book of Acts allows us to examine just how the apostles were able to live into this farewell prayer - that all may be one. This text begins where we left off last

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

week: *“One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.”* (Acts 16:16) Even though the prophesy of this slave girl seems to be accurate, we are told that Paul became annoyed with her after several days. He then exorcised the demon from her. Commentator, David G. Forney offers these insights into this exorcism: *“By the power of Jesus Christ, her torment was turned to health, her slavery to freedom. The slave girl was made whole, neither because of Paul's impulse nor because of her faith, but because of Jesus' prayer that ‘all may be one’”*²

However, this exorcism annoyed those who were profited from her activity. Not only were her owners annoyed, but they also charged Paul and the disciples with crimes of disturbing the city and advocating customs that are not lawful to Roman citizens. *“The magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.* (Acts 16: 22b- 23)

The mysterious earthquake that loosened their chains and opened the prison doors follows their imprisonment. Assuming the prisoners would have escaped, the jailer decides to take his own life rather than to face the consequences of his failure to guard the prisoners. Then comes the ultimate mystery when Paul proclaims in a loud voice: *“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”* (Acts 16;28) We are all here. Rather than choosing freedom when offered, Paul and the disciples choose to be “one” with the jailor. Commentator Forney adds this interpretation: *“The irony is that those who seem to be in prison are actually free in Christ, and the jailer, who supposedly has the keys to freedom, is actually the one shackled by his duty.”*³

What is it then that causes the followers of Jesus throughout history to experience the lack of oneness? It seems that as long as people gather together in community there exists the likelihood of people who struggle to gain power or position over one another. There is jealousy. There are attempts to prove oneself right and the other wrong. We know from the other gospel stories that this lack of unity existed even among the early disciples who struggled for positions of power among Peter, James and John. Paul struggled to be recognized as an apostle even though he was not one of the original twelve.

Division and disagreement seem almost to be synonymous with the history of the church throughout the ages – and not just the history of the church but also the history of humankind. Humans have sought throughout history to have dominion over one another. Empires have been established and wars have been fought over land, over money, over power, over who is right and who is wrong; even over who God is or who's side God is on.

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

We need to look no further than the political climate in our own United States to see where unity seems a most difficult concept to grasp.

But let us return now to the moment in time – in the 1950’s when our denomination – the United Church of Christ – was formed by a merger of denominations. I was only ten years old in 1957 when the merger was accomplished. I remember the tremendous spirit and movement toward ecumenism that existed at that time and on into the 1960’s. The founders of the United Church of Christ did not expect the mergers of similar-minded denominations to end. Today’s scripture text clearly was influential in motivating these challenging and difficult efforts to bring unity to bodies of people who still hung to issues of practices and beliefs that they wanted to preserve.

There have been many other efforts within Protestantism to merge denominations. However, today there is awareness that it is possible to be in collaboration and to participate in shared ministries without necessarily spending the energy that is required to come together in full merger. This is also true with many local congregations who share pastoral resources across denominations and groups such as TRUST that offer specific ministries for multiple congregations. Another avenue for deeper explorations are ecumenical and interfaith dialogues which help us to understand, appreciate and respect both our similarities and differences with other Christian religious expressions and to understand, appreciate and respect the faith journeys of other faith bodies such as our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu, brothers and sisters. Throughout my personal faith journey, today’s text has been influential to me in always keeping an open mind for deeper ecumenism.

Commentator Carmen also suggests: *“Our moments of unity with God and with our neighbors allow us hope for the eventual reconciliation and unity of all humankind. The modern ecumenical movement has sought both to live into a vision of united church and into a vision of a reconciled, just, and peaceful humanity. Both efforts are in keeping with the spirit of Jesus’ prayer.”*⁴

As we move forward as a denomination and as an individual faith community, it is my hope that we have this prayer on our lips – that they may all be one – and that we may “be here” in our unity with all humankind as we experience and share the joy of being loved by God. May we all be here, one with the other, in care, in support and in love. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.