

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Jody McDevitt, co-pastor

May 28, 2017  
*7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter*  
John 17:1-11

### Where Human Unity Begins

Jesus prays, "Holy Father, guard them as they pursue this life that you conferred as a gift through me, so they can be one heart and mind as we are one heart and mind."

Once again, we are gathered as a Christian congregation on a Sunday after a divisive election which concluded with an unforeseen ending. Once again, we are breathing a sigh of relief that, for now at least, we won't be barraged with advertising blatantly aimed at raising levels of fear and animosity toward the "other" candidate. Once again, we are settling down to see if our leaders can show us how democracy works for the good of the people.

We do so in an atmosphere of division and disunity. Now, this isn't the first time in our nation's history that speaking about unity has been a challenge for Christian preachers. If manuscripts were available, it would be an interesting study to read what preachers said to their congregations in the years surrounding the Civil War. I know that in the era of the Viet Nam War and the Civil Rights movement, some preachers spoke their minds and others kept silence. My friends, there is an important tightrope to walk between the Bible and our Christian witness in the world. So it is clear to me this morning that Jesus' prayer for unity needs to be heard amid the divisions of our place and time.

Let me start with the divisions within which we live. Some divisions are benign or beneficial, designed to create order, as when we divide into states, or counties, or two high schools in one city. Other divisions are the result of history. 500 years ago a movement began in Europe which became known as the Protestant Reformation. Names were called and blood was spilled—there are parts of this history which are ugly—but today we live with the results of that movement, most of the time very amicably. Next month, we will share a Vacation Bible School with our Methodist, Episcopal, Baptist, Disciples of Christ, and Congregational neighbors. We have ceased the name-calling, publicly declared other forms of Christianity to be faithful representations of Christ's church, and mostly forgotten what all the fighting was about. When it comes to local ecumenical relations, I think Christ's prayer for unity is prevailing. It does not make us uniform, but helps us recognize that we can have unity in diversity, and diversity in unity.

But then there are the historically rooted divisions which continue to drive wedges between people in our world. We have been taught to identify people as members of different races, and our culture has taught us that there are inherent and important differences between people of different races. In the 1940s, the American Red Cross universally segregated blood by the racial assignment they gave to donors, as if there were such a thing as Negro blood and Caucasian blood. It wasn't until 1972 that this practice was outlawed in all 50 states. This story may seem hard to believe, because we know that human blood is human blood and its color is always red. But those in authority, though they knew that there was no scientific support for it, thought this was a "psychologically important" policy, to keep the blood supply segregated so that transfusion recipients could be assured that they were receiving what they thought was the right color of blood.

Today we are learning about the human genome. It turns out that not only do all humans have the same blood, but we also all have virtually the same DNA. Differences in skin color, hair type, facial features, and body shape cannot be tied to any cluster of genes to discretely separate people into racial groups. These distinctions may be correlated with continental ancestry, but that's it. Genetic variability

among humans is a tiny portion of our DNA. Biologically speaking, "race" is not real. It's a pattern for dividing people that we have been taught—a social construct which has a LOT of power and influence.

The urge to divide and discriminate is a human urge, maybe one of the best illustrations of our tendency toward sin. If sin is separation from God and/or one another, then we are seeing and hearing a great deal of sin in our public discourse these days. We are allowing the spirit of division to dominate our thinking and our actions. One might say, we are living in sin.

Which is why we need Jesus. As he prays in today's scripture, Jesus' purpose is that we might know God, and thus receive real and eternal life. I like to compare Jesus to an icon on your computer screen—click on Jesus, and you'll open up God. Wow! Such glory! Such splendor! Such unity! And such diversity! For here's where the idea of the Trinity comes into play. God is One, and God is Three. God is One, and God is Father, Son, Spirit. God is One, and God is Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. God is One, and God is Community. If we can come to a full knowledge of God, who is One and who is at the same time a diverse community of three, then maybe we can overcome our human tendency to see only the differences and not see what we hold in common.

That is the goal for which Jesus prays for his church, that we may be one, as he and the Father are one. That we may be of one heart and mind, as God and Jesus are of one heart and mind. That in our life, we might display the life of God, the trinitarian dance of difference which celebrates divine unity.

Theologian Miroslav Volf has written a book entitled *After Our Image: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. This is like saying that the church itself is an icon of God. Click on us, and you'll open up the Trinity, who is simultaneously unity and multiplicity.

In Jesus' prayer for his followers, his prayer for the disciples of the first century and disciples of every century since, his prayer for the church, he is passing on his mission to us. He acknowledges that he will no longer be visible in the world—but somebody has to keep his mission going. That's where we come in. If the mission is to bring people to a knowledge of God, then what better way than to represent God's unity amid diversity. Jesus prays that we might be one so that others in the world will look at us and see the unity in diversity that is God.

And then, of course, defeat the sinful tendency to look at others and see only differences, to divide and conquer, or divide and oppress, or divide and discriminate, or divide and treat unjustly. The church is called to be the seed of unity in a world of disunity, to be the nucleus around which others gather in a spirit of community. Human unity, the end of enmity and war, begins in our Triune God, in whose image we are made. Human unity grows in Christ's people, for whom he prays that we might be one in heart and mind even as we are many. Human unity infects the world, overcoming its divisions and polarities, its sectarianism and racism.

This idea made for a bold statement of faith in the nation of South Africa in the 1980s, for it challenged the existing social and political order. But the existing order was built on the backs of way too many people, who were not European in descent. One of our Reformed church partners took the risk of defying the way things were, writing and proclaiming the Belhar Confession. Many church leaders were imprisoned for their words and actions, standing up to apartheid on the ground of their faith. Last summer, our own General Assembly adopted this confession into our Book of Confessions, so that this powerful proclamation might challenge and teach us to pursue justice and unity. For like Christians in every time and place, we are on the tightrope from the Bible to our Christian witness in the world.

The Rev. Denise Anderson, who is serving a two-year term as co-moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and presided over the adoption of the Belhar Confession in our church, expresses the tightrope walk this way.

We are not just called to be good people.

We are not just called to be good to people.

We are called to be each others' people.

*(Love An Other video series, #2, Theocademy, 2016)*

And the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who understood deeply the unity of God, the unity of Christian people, and the unity of all humanity wrote so eloquently in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*,

All [of us] are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

My friends, Christ is praying for us. He is praying that we might be one. He is praying that we might be witnesses to unity. He is praying that we might have eyes to see the sin of division and injustice, and that we might have courage to speak up and stand up for unity and justice—in his place, as his followers together. He is praying that we might be each other's people. He is praying that we might recognize and rejoice in the web of mutuality that ties us together, with fellow Christian believers and with every other human being on the planet. He is praying for divine unity to become our way of life as humans, in all our wonderful diversity.

Look around you in the world—surely you see division which needs healing. Surely you see someone who needs hope. Surely there is something you can do, not alone, but with others who follow Christ. And surely, he will be praying for us, from our first timid steps to our last. Thank you, Jesus!