

“Being One”

*Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21;
John 17:20-26*

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 7, June 2, 2019, dedicated to Mark Williams and the 16 Youth Mission Trip members, to Margene Whittenburg, who passed to eternal life on Tuesday, and to Erin & John Krall and Emily & Scott Montgomery who were married yesterday at First Church and always to the glory of God!

“Being One”

Acts 16:16-34; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21;

John 17:20-26

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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There wasn't much time left. He knew his end was near. So, he gathered his family for a final prayer. He wasn't praying for himself – although he was the one about to die. He wasn't praying for his family – although they were about to lose the love of their lives. He was praying for you and me. He was praying for the generations of family not yet born. He was praying for us.

How could he even know we would exist someday? And how could he know we needed a prayer like this so badly?

He was speaking to us when he said, “the goal is for all of you to have one heart and mind – just as your Father are one, I pray that you might be of one heart and mind with us. I pray that you will mature in this oneness...”

The “He” of whom I am speaking is Jesus. The prayer of which I am speaking is found in today Gospel Lesson from John 17:20-26. Jesus couldn’t be clearer. He is calling his followers through the ages and right into this sanctuary and this congregation on this day – to have ONE heart and mind. And that One Heart and Mind is to love one another.

Most of us get this. But, some of us miss this. I am mystified and troubled that some of us miss the clear and unconditional message of love for ONE ANOTHER? I can only imagine it is because those of us who may not have experienced love, but were instead hurt by life, turn that hurt outward against others.

It is clear in our faith and in the teachings of Jesus, we are not called to judge one another, to be smug about one another, to gossip and chatter needlessly about one another, to believe ourselves smarter than another or better than another in any way. We are not called to split a church or even split hairs in church. We are clearly and simply directed to love one another and work together for the building up of the body of Christ.

We belong to a fragile and beautiful creation as members of the body of Christ. In our organic and natural form, we can often have the elements of an endangered species. If the living conditions are not stable, the body can break down and suffer immeasurably.

Yesterday, after my second wedding of the afternoon, I was approached by a member of our one of our UCC congregations further into the Midwest. He told me that his church has seen five pastors come and go in the past 17 years. The Congregation has lost a third of their membership – dropping from a healthy 1500 to well under 900. He was heartbroken as he said, “We have deep factions in the church. There are those who got rid of our five pastors and then the rest of us. They feel powerful for driving out pastors and we feel ashamed that we allowed it to happen. People don’t even talk to each other anymore. I can’t go to church anymore. It makes me sick. What should I do?”

I asked him how much he loved his church. He admitted he loved the church a lot. I said, “You need to go back, love everyone and work for unity in your church. No sides will do with Jesus. He is really clear about that.”

I see the divisions in the body of Christ in so many places. Recently, I was in a meeting at Nationwide Insurance on the Monday after the United Methodist Church voted to not accept marriage for all and ordination or full membership for those who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

Before we started, one man approached me and shared with me that he had entered his congregation, Reynoldsburg UMC, the day before and was appalled by what happened. As he stepped into the sanctuary, there were literally groups huddled in opposite corners - some who were crying because of the loss and pain of this decision and others who were rejoicing and high-fiving each other because of this decision. He said the division was palpable. The joy and pain were both extreme and he found himself sick for his gay friends and angry at his straight ones. He said, "I don't know where I will go to church next Sunday."

LGBT divides in the church are not the only places where we are witnessing splits in churches. The country is being torn in two in church and society in many ways – including with the passage of more severe Abortion Laws (including Ohio) which deepen our divides around abortion and women's rights to choose. There are churches today which are delighting in the growing number of states who are tightening the stranglehold of Abortion Laws and shutting down women's options around safe and legal abortions. But, in most pulpits across our country there is silence as pastors abandon women in their pews who feel left behind as laws are passed which affect them but are not reflective of choices they have made or might make.

Ten days ago, I was moved deeply by Michelle Alexander's New York Times article this week entitled, "My Rapist Apologized: I Still Needed an Abortion." Michelle begins her

piece by telling of a kitchen conversation with her 12-year-old daughter who asked her what she thought about abortion. Michelle is totally honest as she opens her gut about her experience. She tells of the personal, painful and politically awakening ways as a woman of color in a nation which increasingly creates laws which cause poor women and women of color to suffer greater consequences of unwanted pregnancies. We are subdividing more and more... Like the man at the wedding, my new friend from Reynoldsburg, the pain is palpable.

“Being One” seems to get harder and harder in a world (and a church) more and more divided along racial lines, political lines, lines of choice, lines of gender preference and sexual orientation. Being Divided defines too much of our daily existence. If only Jesus knew how hard it was to be one in his name!

Actually, I think Jesus knew exactly how hard it would be. He knew the stresses and strains, the differences, divisions and difficulties of his own time and that is exactly why he offered his last prayer for the unity and sanctity of his church for all time to come. His calling us to be One was calling us to be different. Loving One Another is often the exception and not the rule. He was calling us to be exceptional. He was calling us to unconditional love.

“Being One” as the body of Christ takes commitment and often guiding principles and measurable tools for building

together and keeping together. I love what the Mennonites have done to address the unity of the church.

As you know, the Mennonite Church USA has a historic commitment to peacemaking. They have created a document called “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” that outlines approaches to conflict – **in thought, in action and in life** (three categories). Each of the three categories has a biblical support for the church to work through conflict. Listen carefully to these helpful guidelines.

In Thought we are to: Accept conflict, acknowledging that it is a normal part of our life together in the church; Affirm hope- and affirm that God walks with us, that we can walk through and work through to greater growth; and Commit to prayer, admitting our needs and committing ourselves to pray for a mutually satisfactory solution.

In Action we are to: Go to the other (no behind the back criticism), ...in the spirit of humility (go in gentleness, patience and humility). Be quick to listen and seek to understand, not be understood; be slow to judge and be willing to negotiate.

In Life we are to: always be steadfast in love and be firm and steadfast as we are seeking mutual solutions; Be open to mediation or skilled help; Trust the community including the larger church and most certainly and finally, BE the body of Christ believing in the solidarity of the body and its commitment to peace and justice (source: Mennonite Church USA, Mennoniteusa.org/peace).

In thought, in action and in life we are called to reconcile differences and be the body of Christ. We can do this. In Jesus Christ, we have the perfect model for such love and unity.

Dr. King said it best, “We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow down before the altar of retaliation. As Arnold Toynbee says, ‘love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil.’ Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word” (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as quoted in Common’s book, Let Love Have the Last Word, Atria Books, NY, NY, 2019, p.3).

On the edge of death and at a table with his sisters and brothers in faith, he gathered his family for one last prayer. He wasn’t praying for himself – although he was the one about to die. He wasn’t praying for his family – although they were about to lose the love of their lives. He was praying for you and me. He was praying for the generations of family not yet born. He was praying for us to love one another and be One in God’s love and united in our fellowship that we have been given as a gift from God.

My prayer is that we fulfill Jesus’ last prayer and be unified in our love for Him, for God and for one another. Amen.