

“As we are one”

Easter 7A

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Gracious and loving God, gather us in to this time and space. Silence in us any voice by your own. In these words, may we hear a word of your truth and grace for us today. Amen.

My family moved to Eastern Ohio when I was in the 3rd grade. One of the first things we did as a family was find a church. This new community had a few Presbyterian churches from which to choose. In fact, as we visited on various Sundays, my father must have parked in the same parking lot each week even if we went to a different church. I kid you not, there were three Presbyterian churches within 50 yards of one another. The churches even shared a parking lot. The ministers could meet in the alley in between and share sermon illustrations. All these churches had been in existence since at least the early 1820s, in nearly the same location. So, it's interesting that in the long histories of these churches, an official 'coming together' had never happened.

Don't get me wrong, these Presbyterians sometimes shared Vacation Bible School. The ministers participated in a pulpit exchange in the summer and shared in the leadership of a combined worship service every now and then. I remember a combined youth group and even a combined youth hand bell choir.

It wasn't until 1996 that two of the three churches intentionally began to consider what a shared ministry in that community could mean. What these two churches were considering is a word you don't much hear in church life---
MERGER.

Bringing churches together is hard. Denominations do it less and less. We never pull it off well. Mergers fail. People's feelings get hurt. Communities remain divided. In the Presbyterian Church--- separation and schism are familiar words. Most recently they have perfected the phrase "Gracious Dismissal" which is the cooler 'churchy' word for the separation of a congregation from the denomination.

Not often does the Church celebrate a merger. Usually when a church and its leaders come across things that are hard or otherwise in need of discernment and decision making the best thing to do is form a committee. And so the two churches did. Faithful elders and members, ministers, youth and adults alike, gathered to see how God might be calling them to a shared ministry.

When Second and Westminster Presbyterian Churches began this faithful discernment together, it appeared that this merger had possibility—good possibility. One thing about the Presbyterians is that they love to do things “decently and in

order.” There wasn’t a rush to combine things. They took their time. So much was at stake.

The decision to merge was not an easy one. Both had strong heritage and mission focus in the community. Thoughtful elders began communications and entered into what would be a three (3) year long process.

This process was prayerfully guided. It was Spirit driven and intentional. It was fellowship and community focused. And it all of it centered around these questions - “How might God be leading us? And to what?”

As they moved forward they realized they needed a new name. And before you could put a “Name the New Church” survey on Facebook, the committee solicited potential church names from anyone who wanted to participate. I guessed it would have been a name with strong Presbyterian roots like Calvin, or even a Biblical name like, “Christ Presbyterian.” Not so for this faithful and Spirit led group. They searched for a name that marked this joining of two becoming one. A name that could magnify their ministry and impact in the world. In 1999 (after a long time of discernment), the merger of Second and Westminster became Unity Presbyterian Church.

What a hopeful name! As one elder recounts, “Unity---oh that makes sense!” Unity reflected the calling these two churches heard to live and work as one. By coming together, they had greater power to be God’s hands and feet in that community and in the world. They had more focus to carry out the mission of God wherever they were.

Unity in it of itself is hard. Name a church Unity and you have a lot to live into! But Jesus calls us to unity. Jesus prays for unity, and yet we often don’t feel it. We remain divided. But without this step to merge, it would have led one or both churches to close their doors and discontinue their ministry in the community.

Think of the practical aspects of merging two churches. Two of everything. Two buildings, two pastors, two boards of trustees, two organs/organists and choirs, budgets, endowments. You name it. What building do we keep/sell? What about the checking accounts? Which baptismal font will we use? What communion table will look the best? What color should the pew cushions be? Whose hymnals? Whose choir robes? What sacred art stays, what goes?

You can only imagine.

Jesus calls us to unity. Unity is hard.

Maybe these churches and the discernment committee read this passage from the Gospel of John today. Jesus prays that God will protect his disciples and followers so that they may be one. Jesus offers prayers for people in the temple. Jesus offers a prayer for unity.

The words of Jesus' prayer offer hope. Jesus wanted the disciples to know of God's love and care for them, for God's protection of them. Jesus prays for his disciples because he will soon leave them to carry on God's work here on earth. Jesus shows his disciples what a full life can be. A full and meaningful life is centered on our relationship with God, a relationship that comes from knowing Jesus Christ.

Jesus is pointing all of us to look beyond the material entities in our world. The source of our unity is not in human structures or denominations, but our unity comes from Jesus Christ. Our life of prayer connects us to the one who initially prayed for us.

I imagine when we come together to join in the transformational mission of God in the world, a church's name doesn't matter so much. The debate over the color of the pew

cushion fades. The great table cloth controversy of 1999, doesn't seem so important anymore. Everything else fades as we attempt to demonstrate that we are one or at least aspire to be one.

The interesting and humbling part of unity is that we can't do this work on our own. Such oneness is beyond our capabilities, but not beyond God's promises.¹ We have been made one through Jesus Christ--through the love and prayerful nature of the one who redeems the world.

Jesus calls us to unity. Unity is hard. Being one together doesn't mean that we ignore our differences, or that we disregard traditions. Not so, in the world and in our society and in our church today, when we live into the unity of which Jesus prays and through which God calls us--we are better together and stronger as a community of faith and as the whole people of God.

Jesus calls us to unity. And unity can bring new life. There is no place where God's claim on our lives can be experienced more than in the unifying waters of baptism. As we are one in Christ, we profess that in the waters, God names us and claims us, and accepts us into God's family. We are

¹ Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 22, 2017

welcomed and set on a new course through these waters and through these words. The waters of baptism are God's unifying love for all people of the earth and an embracing spirit for us all. And today, Madelyn is now part of God's circle of care, our circle of care for her.

It's been twenty years, since God set Unity Presbyterian Church on its new course. They risked their own life-their own existence for the sake of the church, that it may have life and have it abundantly. Their congregation is growing. They are active in the community with ministries and mission and they collaborate with other brothers and sisters in Christ for God's work in that place. Jesus calls us to unity and unity brings new life.

As children of God, we are united in one faith in a living God who is revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are united in faith in Jesus Christ whose word fills us with faith. We are also united in faith in the Holy Spirit whose presence guides us through life. Although we are one in faith, we have to put that faith into action, especially by being one in service. It is in serving that our faith becomes real. When we serve one another, we serve Christ.²

² Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, <http://sermonsfrommyheart.blogspot.com/2011/11/acts-16-14-john-171-11-unity.html>

What does unity look like for our community of faith? As we live into the next months and years and listen for God's calling on our lives as individuals and as a church, what is God calling us to do? Maybe God is calling us to risk something great for the sake of the church. As we work together for the larger calling God has for us, we begin with prayer for our church, for those within this space, those who are not here and those who are not yet known to us. Working together for the healing of our community and for the spiritual nurture of all of us, we will continue to grow and learn together in the spirit of unity as Jesus prays for each of us.

May it be so. Amen.

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