

## What Really Makes Us One

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on October 4, 2020  
Friendship Presbyterian Church

*"I ask not only on behalf of these [my disciples], but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 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. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."* (John 17:20-26, NRSV)

It seems that controversy and division are indelible parts of the human condition. Maybe the tendency to divide ourselves from one another ... to see our differences as more important than what we hold in common is hardwired inside us. And nowhere can we see this all-too-human tendency on display more than in our religion.

Did you hear about the man they discovered all by himself on a desert island a few years ago? Apparently, he had been living there successfully for years, all by himself. No one else was there. When they found him, they also discovered three buildings on the island, right behind him. So they asked, "What's this building?" "Why," he said, "that's my home, my house. That's where I live." "Oh, that's good," they said, "and what's this second structure?"

"Well," the man replied, "that's my church. That's where I go to church."

"Excellent," they said. "How beautiful!"

"And what's this third building on the island?"

The man replied, "Oh, that's where I used to go to church."

Here, today, in our gospel passage we have an extraordinary scene. We see many examples in the gospels of Jesus' words and deeds. He told parables. He healed the sick. He challenged the religious and political authorities. He spoke and taught of what he called the Kingdom of God. But here, he is *praying* – praying for his disciples and for all who would become disciples through their word. He *might* have prayed for their success ... for a big steeple church on every Roman street corner. And later in the chapter, he *does* pray for their protection. But first, he prays – what?

*That they may all be one. That they may be one.*

But seeing and living this oneness is another matter! For centuries, followers of Jesus have tried – and failed – to establish or maintain such oneness, such unity. We have tried to ground this unity on agreement in matters of doctrine, but that has always ended up badly. But what really *could* make us one?

Complicating matters is the scriptural truth that we somehow already *are* one! We Christians, divided from one another over any number of things, have *already been made one* because of the Cross of Christ – that one place where the negation of our unity before God is itself negated ... where all that is the contradiction of life is itself contradicted. But if our deep unity is *already* a reality, then why is it so hard to see this truth and to *live* this truth?

I believe the clues to the answer lie in the gospel passage we just read. Which words in the passage stand out most for you? I can say for myself that two do: *glory* ... and *love*. Jesus speaks of the glory that he has been given and that he shares with his disciples, which *is* the bond that unites them, even the same divine bond which unites the Father and Son: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one ...”

It may not seem clear what Jesus means by this “glory” in which we share and through which we are one – that is, until we look closely at John's Gospel, at the placement of this prayer, these final words before he is betrayed, and we remember that Christ's *glory is* his Cross. This is not what the world understands as glory, but to eyes of faith, it is supremely in the sacrifice of Christ, pouring out his life for the life of the whole world, that we see the truest, grandest glory of God ... not the glory of raw power and might, but the glory of vulnerable, unconditional love.

It is *this* love, this *glory* of God, which saves us and endows us with meaning and purpose. It is this love, this glory, which calls us to the adventure of faith in which we follow Jesus on this path. Nothing about this is easy. It's the call of a lifetime – which yields the time of our lives. It yields bonds of love between fellow disciples which are stronger than anything that can divide us, for in this service of others we get our minds off who is right and who is wrong, who's to blame and who's not, and into a *fellowship*, a shared taste, of the love of God which would dissolve every barrier we put up between ourselves.

This is what Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller meant when he spoke and wrote of his “theology of the hammer.” Habitat was and is a partnership founded on common ground— bridging theological differences simply by putting love into action. Anyone – Protestant,

Catholic ... Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian ... black, white, Asian, Latino ... straight or gay ... Frozen Chosen or Holy Roller – can use a hammer as an instrument to manifest the love which is born of God. "We may disagree on all sorts of other things," he would say, "but we can agree on the idea of building homes with God's people in need."

Habitat for Humanity is, of course, a great Georgia-born example, but you know that there are so many others – so many ministries and opportunities close at hand, right here in this community, by which we can live into our deep unity with other people of faith through unselfish service and acts of compassion. It's what "following Jesus" really should always have been about.

The Spirit even now is prodding us, luring us, to live into the realization of Jesus' own prayer for us ... his prayer taking on flesh at the center of our common life. Our differences may remain, but the higher call of self-giving service can bridge those differences, as we allow our theology to be a living, active testimony, rather than a dead, dividing word.

We may not agree on the nature of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, but we can come together in his name and serve the homeless a meal. We may not agree on sprinkling or dunking, or on baptizing babies or not, but we can raise our voices together to speak up for the poor, the weak, and the exploited. We may not even agree over whether something is a sin or not, but as followers of one who deeply identified with those on the margins of society, we might resolve together to show the world what love without judgment looks like.

And when we do this, as we live into this deeper unity with others who confess Christ, we will bear witness to an even greater unity – that of all humankind. Christ's compassion knows no boundaries. He builds no walls to keep anyone out. There are no modern-day "lepers" he is

afraid to touch. He doesn't pick and choose those whom he will serve and those whom he won't. It's not his way. And because we belong to him, it's not our way either.

May this ever be true of us. May this be the path we follow. What a grand call it is that we should join together, and love and serve our neighbors – in those delicious words of our own Book of Order – with “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love.” *We get to do that!* Maybe *that's* why the gospel is called the “*good news*”.

To the glory of God. Amen.