

The 'U' in Unity



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston
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Seventh Sunday after Easter
Ascension Sunday

John 17:6-19

⁶ "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. *Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.* ¹² While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. ¹³ But now I am coming to you, *and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.* ¹⁴ I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁵ I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the

world. ¹⁹ And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.

This is the word of God, thanks be to God.

It is scripture like this one in John's gospel that makes it one of my favorite gospels. I love that John knew how important it would be for followers of Christ throughout the generations to hear Jesus talking to God about us. John reports that in Jesus' prayer, Jesus says that we were given to Jesus by God and we belong to God. It makes me think of the confessions that read, 'in life and in death we belong to God'.

Reformers might talk about this scripture using the terms gift and task. What is the gift? The gifts are many. Creation is a gift. Reconciliation is a gift along with the freedom we find in God. Certainly, it is a gift to know that we belong to God and Jesus is glorified in us but there is also a task. The task is our daily discipleship that we accept in response to the gifts given. The task happens to be the same one which God gave to Jesus, to be sent into the world sanctified with truth.

What we hear in Jesus' prayer is his concerned for us on three fronts:

- First, there is hostility in this world; hostility that resulted in Jesus being crucified but the hostility of the world didn't end with this event. Jesus knows that hostility and even hatred will always be present. Jesus knew that not everyone would care about being one with him and God. He knew that not everyone would seek this oneness which means that being in this world can be dangerous. He knew that not everyone would seek this relationship or to be open to the truths that God and God's word can teach us.
- Second, while Jesus has ascended to the Father's glory, Jesus knows that He has left His followers here to do the task of being the presence of God and communicators and witnesses to the gospel. He knows that this is no easy task. He knows that we are not God incarnate we are human, fully human with the capacity to do great good but also the capacity to do great harm.
- Finally, Jesus prays and asks God to make us one which is where I will focus this sermon for today. I want to focus on what Jesus might have been asking of God. I want to focus on this corporate belonging and what it may or may not have to say about unity.

It is not only Jesus who is concerned about us being one, others were as well. What we learn from John's first letter to the early followers is that

divisions were occurring even in the earliest of churches. Gnostic philosophy was being taught which the Apostle John knew would lead followers of Christ astray. Matthew wrote of a great tribulation that would occur that would lead people away from God and the Apostle Paul specifically in Acts 20 warned the elders at Ephesus that as he leaves them 'fierce wolves' will come to try to draw the followers of Christ away from the truth and the Apostle Peter warned about Satan being like a roaring lion.

Divisions came even in the early church, so does this mean that God did not answer or respond to Jesus' prayer asking to make us one? Even asking this question begs a conversation about Christian unity. If we understand unity as a state where everyone is always nice, where conflicts are not tolerated and where everyone believes the very same doctrine, this clearly does not display our freewill (limited as it is to do the good) nor does it give credence to the fact that God gave us working thinking brains, intelligence and creativity. Unity where everyone hides their true feelings and where we cannot engage in healthy conflict is not unity at all.

In my experience, the greatest times of growth in my faith happened as I was challenged in my thinking or was invited to question and even to debate. So many of you in this congregation are teachers and professors and I know that inviting your students to open themselves to knowledge and creativity, questioning the norm, is what you do.

The history of the church certainly does not display this type of so-called unity. The disciples worked with churches who had disputes. We celebrate the reformation where people used their God given intelligence to discern scripture and to teach biblical principles that began a whole new set of denominations and not in conformity with the Catholic church. One can study and learn where all the different denominations within the Christian tradition began. We can even learn the history of other faith traditions as well. With all the different Christian denominations and other faith traditions was Jesus' prayer to make us one as God and Jesus are one, not answered? Or was Jesus' prayer that our being one hold a much larger understanding?

H. Richard Niebuhr wrote in his book, Christ and Culture, about the five postures from which the church engages with culture including: Christ *against* Culture, Christ *of* Culture, Christ *above* Culture, Christ and Culture *in paradox* and Christ *the Transformer of* Culture. While it would take several classes just to teach Niebuhr's concepts, what I will do is point out a few of his thoughts where the church tends to go and how these concepts lead to Christian churches having differing ideas about our unity in Christ and what it means to be a Christian in the world.

For Christian churches that preach a Christ against Culture, the Apostle Paul writings in 2 Corinthians 6 provided evidence for Christian churches to stand against culture where he talks about the importance of being separate from the world. Niebuhr wrote, *"For the radical Christian the whole world outside the sphere where Christ's Lordship is explicitly acknowledged is a realm of equal darkness."* For Christians who hold this view, anything outside of the church and its teaching is not of God. It is their understanding of being one. Niebuhr points out that while withdrawal and renunciation is part of our Christian liturgy and practice (for example during a baptism liturgy we renounce sin) it must be balanced with responsible engagement in cultural tasks.

I was raised in this context of Christ against Culture thinking. To be a Christian was to stand out from the world and not participate in worldly practices which pretty much included everything except for things that the church or my youth group was doing. No school dances, no going to movies, no listening to popular music, no dressing like the style of the day. The Amish could be described in this way as they withhold themselves from anything considered modern. Lack of looking for that balance as Niebuhr describes it puts us at odds with the world. When we are at odds with any one we lose our ability to be an influence.

Miroslav Volf, professor of theology and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture gives a great example of H. Richard Niebuhr's idea of Christ in Culture by asking the question: *"of if whether all those unappreciated small and great van Goghs in various fields of human activity, would they not draw inspiration and strength from the belief that their noble efforts are not lost, that everything good, true and beautiful they create is appreciated by God and will be appreciated by human beings in the new creation."*

As part of being Christians who believe Christ in Culture, we work as one by making contact with the culture while at the same time standing against injustice or corruption within the culture. These Christians would likely claim to have a social gospel approach that find value in culture where our duty is to bring Christ into the current culture. They believe that the teachings of Christ impact how we react to the world and the things that happen in the world. These Christians would ask: Where do we see injustice? Where do we see inequality? Where do we see opportunity to help another and they do it not for conformity or some false sense of unity or oneness, they do it because they believe that this is their task, their calling from Jesus to be in this world.

I served the Committee on Ministry while in Indiana as a liaison to a church that wanted to leave the PCUSA and go to the EPC or the Evangelical

Presbyterian Church. The members of this church felt no unity or oneness with the PCUSA. They would be described as a Christ against Culture church whereas they saw the PCUSA pushing a very social gospel and they could not see where both the PCUSA and the EPC might each one in their own way be one in God.

Christ above Culture: Is the idea that the purpose of the church is to lift people in society and the culture to have a fresh revelation of the truth of the gospel. Isaiah chapter 2 and Ezekiel chapter 47 shows us examples of where these prophets looked beyond the present to see how God was at work in the world. Keeping a vision of a better world and our part in helping others to have a vision for a world where there is plenty for everyone, where wars cease and strife ends, where power is used for the betterment of all people is Christ above Culture. Our oneness, in this train of thought, is that in God our shared sense of belonging is to God but also to one another. Christ above culture helps us not to put ourselves and what we want for our own selfish pleasures over everything and everyone else. We just need to be careful that we don't begin believing that we are the only arbiters of the truth.

A current book that I have found challenging and helpful as we think about oneness and unity is a book written by Alan Alda entitled, [If I Understood You, Would I have This Look On My Face?](#) What Alda seeks to do is to help his readers understand that we have trouble communicating which can lead to conflict. Alda would like for people to be better listeners, be people who ask questions and feel safe and okay doing so, and to be people who are willing to look behind the words and actions of others to really hear what is behind someone else's thinking. Alda admits that this is a skill that is developed. This is a great skill for a pastor to have. So often what someone may be upset about or where there is dispute in the church occurs when don't feel heard. I have learned in my practice of listening that the three most important words I can say to someone who is upset are, "I HEAR YOU". I have learned to repeat what they told me so that they know that I have not only listened, I heard them. The church, especially in times of transition, can fall into unfounded fears, anxiety, panic all which can be caused simply because things at church as people knew them are changing. It is a time for us to work on our listening skills and to try to hear, really hear what may be going on for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I hope you are hearing encouragement to question, encouragement to engage in healthy dialogue, encouragement to think differently than someone else for this, this is the oneness I believe Jesus was asking for but this oneness in Christ is tough. No wonder Jesus prayed for us to be one.

No wonder that this would be one of Jesus' concerns for us. Jesus knew that He would not be present in this world to be the official arbiter of truth.

I have come to realize that our being one that Jesus asked God for does not mean that we are to believe the same, hold one opinion, be all of one denomination but rather that we understand that we are one in the eyes of God. Our unity is inbuilt even if some would say that don't belong to God for that simply isn't true. We all become people who confess God and witness to the truth simply knowing that we and all others belong to God.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we thank you that you prayed for us revealing to us that you knew our task to be followers of your kingdom would be a difficult task. Continue to stand with us through the power of your Holy Spirit as we continue to be the ones holding the gospel truths. Then help us not to fear culture but rather to be your presence, glorified in you, so that others can see your love in us. Amen