

United in Christ

A sermon on John 17

Rudy Baergen

Jesus prayed, “I ask not only on behalf of these, 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” (John 17:20-21). This picture of unity contrasts starkly with the history of the Christian church, now carved up into thousands of denominations and subgroups. After 2000 years, Jesus’ prayer for his followers to be one as he is one with the Father may seem like a distant dream.

I suspect that many of us have had experiences that have brought home to us the extent of the church’s disunity. When Helen and I were studying Spanish in a missionary language

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school in San Jose, Costa Rica, we were hard put to sense what we had in common with many of the American students, who backed the CIA-supported dirty wars in Guatemala and El Salvador and supported U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North in his illegal clandestine efforts to fund the Contras’ subversive war in Nicaragua. We found ourselves up against a whole mind-set of

political, social, and theological values that we found deeply objectionable. Even our understandings of God’s salvation seemed to go in different directions. What does Christian unity mean when we disagree on politics, ethics, worship style, how to read the Bible, and even basic confessions of faith?

The history of schism in our own Anabaptist-Mennonite story is a source of embarrassment to us. But we aren’t alone. My Baptist friends in Bolivia used to say that where two Baptist brothers are gathered, there are three Baptist churches. Perhaps it is some consolation to know that the early church also struggled

with divisions. In spite of the initial show of unity in the book of Acts, we soon hear about the conflict between Jewish and Greek Christians in Jerusalem, which leads to the selection of deacons in Acts 6. Acts 15 tells of a conference held to prevent the first major schism in the church over the issue of what to require of Gentile Christians. The apostle Paul's letters also give insight into divisions and disagreements that plagued the churches throughout the Mediterranean world of the first century.

If we pay close attention to the writings that come out of John's community—the Gospel of John and the letters of John—we also detect serious struggles. John's Gospel needs to be read at several different levels. John says there are disciples who turned back and no longer follow Jesus, those who believed but now no longer believe (6:66). At the time of the writing of the Gospel and the letters at the turn of the first century, that division was still playing itself out. John writes, "They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us" (1 John 2:19). In the third letter, John speaks of a Diotrefes who does not acknowledge John's authority and in fact expels John's friends from the church (vv. 9-10). So

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Jesus' prayer for unity addresses an immediate concern within John's community and in John's Gospel. Disunity has plagued the followers of Jesus from the beginning.

The prayer of Jesus, sometimes called his high priestly prayer, is found only in John's Gospel, as part of Jesus' lengthy discourse at the Passover supper, which begins in chapter 13. Jesus prays not just for his immediate community of disciples but also for future believers, for us: "for those who will believe in me" through the disciples' word. We are part

of that long chain through which faith has been passed on; it winds its way back through the centuries, through a multitude of languages and cultures, back to the disciples.

Jesus prays that those who come to believe through the word of the disciples may be one as he and the Father are one. Note that this oneness allows for some diversity, in that the Father and

the Son remain distinct despite their unity.¹ Although there is singleness in purpose and mission, there is also distinction. Unity does not necessarily mean sameness. Then what is the nature of this unity that Jesus calls for? Is it denominational or organizational unity? Is it having a single purpose? Does it mean working together without conflict? Is it some kind of mystical union that isn't necessarily evident in personal feelings, harmonious relationships or organization? Is it something we create?

When Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one, our attention is drawn to an essential point: this unity is not the result of human endeavour but has its origin in God's action. Jesus prays to the Father for this unity. The key to unity is the power of God. Unity comes from the Father and the Son to the believers. Our action and our feelings are not the source of our unity in the church.

At the 2006 Mennonite Church Canada Assembly in Edmonton, Alberta, the Faith and Life Committee statement, "The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ," referred to Ephesians 2:

According to the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, unity is not our doing. We are bound together by something bigger than our own efforts and immeasurably greater than our failures. Unity in Christ is not something we choose to create; rather, it is the blessing of Christ's death on the cross granted to us. In Ephesians 2, Paul is talking specifically of how Christ broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In Paul's mind there could be no division more radical, yet God through Christ broke down the barrier and placed the two enemies into one family.²

We can pick our friends, but we do not choose our siblings. Likewise, as God's adopted children, we don't choose our brothers and sisters in faith. The question is not whether the family has been formed into one body by one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, but whether the unity bestowed will be claimed and celebrated (Ephesians 4).

Our congregation is one not as a result of our own efforts. If our unity depended on us, we would have failed long ago. Con-

flict has left its mark on our church over the decades. Angry things have been said, which have left their imprint of pain, personal and corporate. We are not always of one mind theologically, even though we have a common confession of faith. We have disagreements about how to read the Bible on matters such as homosexuality, abortion, use of material possessions, and other ethical issues facing our society. We may even disagree about how to understand the authority of scripture. The unity we experience is not a consequence of our tolerance and inclusiveness. It is a miracle of grace. We are bound together in peace by Christ through his death on the cross (Eph. 2:15-16).

This morning we celebrate our union in Christ with communion. The Lord's Supper has a vertical and a horizontal dimension.

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In the supper we celebrate the union that Christ has given to us. That is the vertical dimension. Communion does not create unity among us; it recognizes that God through Christ has already made us one. All our grounds for enmity have been eliminated, even if we don't acknowledge that fact. The horizontal dimension of communion has to do first of all with our acknowledging to one another that we are one before Christ, even when we disagree and are in conflict. Furthermore, the horizontal dimension involves an inner and outer declaration that we will hang

in there with one another, no matter how difficult the journey, because Jesus has asked us to do that. Jesus wants us to be one even as he and the Father are one.

Some years ago I helped mediate a serious conflict within my congregation. When it came time to celebrate communion, one of the parties, recognizing that there was still much to resolve in the broken relationship, wondered whether it was right to participate in the communion service. My response was this: When we celebrate communion, we are not declaring that we have no differences, disagreements, or struggles. We are declaring that God through Christ's death has made us one, that Jesus wants us to be one even as he and the Father are one. True, this oneness is not just a mystical relationship that gives us licence to ignore our

disunity in practice. Communion is also our declaration that we want to be united, that we commit ourselves to do what is necessary, step by step, slow as that process might be, to realize the unity that Christ offers us. The unity of believers is grounded in the unity of the Father and the Son. And while it will only be consummated in heaven, it is agenda to which we commit ourselves now.

In the Mennonite church we have a tradition of serving one another in communion. We pass the elements down the row. The idea is not to serve oneself but to serve the other. In order to be especially conscious of that mutual service today, the server will give the bread and cup to the second person in the row, and that person will serve the one who was passed over. The basket will then be passed on to the third person who will serve the second person in the row, and so on. Don't serve yourself: let someone else serve you, and be eager to serve the person next to you. We also have an old tradition of looking into the eyes of the one with whom we take communion, to acknowledge that we are on this road of experiencing the unity that God has given to us. When you receive the bread and the wine, look at the person serving you, nod your head, and smile or say, "Christ has made us one!"

Jesus wants us to be one, even as he and the Father are one. Why does Jesus want us to be one? "So that the world may believe that the Father has sent me." Disunity among us cuts the feet from under the gospel. Disunity among us gives the lie to what we proclaim, and the world will see our hypocrisy. If we don't commit ourselves to unity, how can we expect the world to believe that Jesus and the Father are one?

Jesus wants us to be one, even as he and the Father are one. Come, let us celebrate our unity in Christ. Come, let us claim the unity that Christ offers to us.

Notes

¹Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (xii–xxi)*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 29A, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 775.

²See <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/Browse/972>.

About the author

Rudy Baergen is the senior pastor at Bethel Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba. This sermon was preached as the culmination of a series on spiritual preferences and unity.