



“That They All May Be One”

Ephesians 4:1-6; John 17:20-26

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The Sixth Sunday of Easter

It seemed like a grand idea whose time had come back in 1957. That grand idea began early in the 20th century when some British university students had a vision of the Christian church unified around God’s mission on earth.

That grand idea became a movement known as the Ecumenical Movement. What began as an idea for mission grew to be a dream of one reorganized and united Church of Christ. For better and for worse, what began as a dream for mission became an institutional vision, a single church organization. A World Council of Churches was formed and, in the United States, the Ecumenical Movement took form in National Council of Churches.

After World War II that dream seemed possible, even probable. The Ecumenical Movement had momentum, effective leaders, and wide popular support among the clergy and lay people. A phrase from our Gospel Lesson was the watchword of a generation of Christians: “That They All May be One.” It was Jesus’ final desire for his disciples, and it was time to obey.

During the early 1950s, leaders of the Congregational denomination held formal talks with the Evangelical and Reformed Church regarding the possible merger of the denominations. A large majority of the constituencies of both denominations agreed and a proposal of merger was offered. The new merged church would be the first fruit of the ecumenical movement and would be called the United Church of Christ.

A vocal minority of Congregational clergy and laity protested. They saw issues and problems in the merger and negotiated to slow down or even stop the process. Some protested loudly.

When it was clear the merger would happen, some in the loud minority decided to use the legal process to stop the merger. Cadman Memorial Church, our Brooklyn neighbor, filed suit in U. S. District Court of Southern New York. In fact, Cadman did not sue the denomination, it sued the Moderator of the General Counsel of the Congregational Christian Church, Helen Kenyon.

It was a long and very expensive process. Members of Plymouth Church supplied legal counsel and money in support of Cadman’s legal action. The suit took four years to wind its way through the courts, and the suit ultimately failed. The United Church of Christ was formed and the dissenting churches, Plymouth included, formed an alternative association of churches.

During the legal process, the Judge of the Southern District, Archie Dawson, a Christian layman read the following into the record:

It is unfortunate that ministers and church members who purport to abide by Christian principles should engage in this long, expensive litigation. In all humility, I urge the parties to this controversy to give prayerful consideration to 1 Corinthians 6:1, 5-7 (which forbids taking other Christians to court)....

Echoes of that old controversy still haunt both groups. It seems that how an institution begins results in significant institutional “DNA” that is part of institutional life. Groups born in controversy have difficulty living without controversy.

Judge Dawson’s comment is appropriate and a prophetic word to the church in any age. Why can’t Christians, of all people, engage in real conflict resolution? Why can’t the Christian Church, of all institutions, live in the unity that Jesus said is part of its essential character? Everything Jesus taught about being the Christian community argues for peacemaking, not litigation.

The divisions that mark Christian history were certainly not what Jesus desired for his people. Unity is essential Christianity. The early Christians were scandalized when the church at Corinth became so divided that members took each other to court. Paul scolded them for it.

One thing is perfectly clear. A divided church — and a divided humanity — are not the way things are supposed to be. The biblical narrative argues from beginning to end that a divided humanity is contrary to God’s desire and, moreover, from the beginning God has been at work to reverse that form of human depravity.

The biblical story begins in unity and immediately degenerates into divided families, clans and tribes. Adam and Eve played the blame game in the Garden of Eden. Their sons, Cain and Abel, engaged in fratricidal conflict that ended in murder at the altar of God. Religious conflict is as old as the human race. The story continues to tell of dysfunctional families, feuding tribes and warring nations.

Alongside that sad narrative, God’s word is written large: “It’s not supposed to be this way.” The Law and the prophets were intended to manage, control and even reverse the endless human quarrel. Most of the Law and the prophets, our Old Testament, describes how to live in a moral, ethical and spiritual community.

Jesus’ mission from God was to plant a piece of eternity on earth, a place where humans could and would live together in peace, not conflict. Jesus recruited followers to form a new community, God’s kingdom, a place where God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. St. Paul calls it living in “the bond of peace.”

Jesus commissioned his followers to continue spreading that new creation after he left. The Gospel Lesson is part of Jesus’ final instructions to them – and his final wish for us. He summed up his desire for his church in two statements: 1. Love each other – as I have loved you. 2. Be one – as God and I are one.

Needless to say it is a difficult assignment and, it need be said, it is a high stakes venture. “Love one another,” Jesus said, “so the world will know you are my disciples.” Our mutual love for one another is the distinguishing mark of the Christian church. Jesus added, “Be one, live in essential unity, so the world will know God sent me.”

Every scandal, each church division, every squabbling Christian community, mocks Jesus’ last wish for his people. Of course it’s difficult. Jesus’ way runs upstream in the flow of human experience. But it can be done. Christ is with us and his spirit empowers us. At least that’s what Scripture promises.

The book of Acts tells the story of the early Christian movement, and it is a story of the norms and values of the gospel, like love and unity, in conflict with ordinary human

nature. One dispute after another is the consequence of that conflict and, in each case, the church figured out how to resolve the conflict and stay together in the bond of peace.

They understood what we often forget: in this work of being Christians, something is at stake much larger than us, our opinions, our causes, or our human interests.

According to St. Paul in the Epistle lesson, the way to keep the peace and live in unity requires a wonderful combination: humility and gentleness. They, the apostle writes, “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” In ways beyond themselves, early Christians found a way to live beyond class, race, social standing, even gender, in their radical new communities.

One example is the little overlooked New Testament book, Philemon. Philemon is a letter to a man named Philemon, a friend of Paul the Apostle. Philemon had a slave, named Onesimus who ran away and sought Paul’s help. In the process Paul led the runaway to faith and into a new humanity.

Paul wrote a letter to Philemon instructing him to receive his runaway back, no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ. Now, he writes, they are joint owners in eternity and nothing can be the same. Something beyond ordinary humanity is a work in the world.

I think I’ve told you this, but it bears repeating. Several years ago, when George W. Bush was President, *Christian Century* told of a unique and very Christian incident that takes place most Sundays.

It seems Karl Rove and the Chairwoman of the Democratic Party in Texas belong to the same church in Dallas. The chairwoman told how the weekly worship ritual, “peace of Christ,” was a challenge both to herself and to Mr. Rove. But they do it — every week. They greet each other and offer one another Christ’s peace. They disagree on most everything political, but are joined together in a cause beyond themselves and their political agendas. “That they all may be one,” is the way Jesus put it.

Escaping our divisive human natures is, and always will be, quite difficult. We live in an adversarial world, a world we created. Evil is real in this world and evil people prey on the weak and threaten all that is good, just, and holy.

Necessary adversarial institutions exist to manage and control the evil that surrounds us and is in us. Left to our own devices, we will exploit and destroy others. We need systems like government, law enforcement, and the justice system to protect us — and control us.

But even those appointed to our care are easily corrupted and — too often — justice, along with the common good, is lost. Add to that our contemporary cultural narcissism that seeps into all our lives, and we have a problem. When personal fulfillment, our rights, satisfying our own desires, mean more than the common good or the good of those who love us, all that is good recedes. Given enough corruption and enough radical individualism, in the end, society will disintegrate.

We need to hear Jesus’ call to keep unity in the bond of peace. We can’t change the world, but we can create a community of faith, a place where authentic Christian character is experienced and shared. God calls us to be an alternative community, a people unified around God’s cause and held together in the bond of peace that Jesus’ presence makes available to us.

We can be a place where moral and spiritual development is experienced in a group committed to moral and spiritual development. We can be a place where children and adults see and experience conflict resolution, where gentleness and peace create a bond of peace that governs attitudes, conversations and congregational life.

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Above all, God calls us to be a place and a people committed to loving God and our neighbors with a power and purpose from beyond ourselves. We can know a moral vision that recreates us and forms this community in the image of Jesus Christ.

That's what made Plymouth great 163 years ago. Our ancestors in this place gathered around a great God who had something that needed to be done in this country. We helped end slavery.

That is what will make Plymouth great again. I want to tell you a true story that is not a suggestion, it is an example.

In a small Christian college in suburban Chicago (a college on whose board I once served), five students read of a raid at O'Hare airport in which several women being sneaked into the U.S. were freed from a life of sexual slavery. The raid opened the students' eyes to a growing national and international moral issue.

The students formed what they call "The TIU (the initials of their school) Abolition Society." They partnered with an organization fighting human trafficking and worked the streets of downtown Chicago handing out pamphlets and engaging people in conversation. Few were interested.

They held a chapel service at their university and stirred up considerable student interest. The TIU Abolition Society is getting traction and is on the move. Who knows what will happen. Student movements have changed the course of history.

Come to think of it, maybe we can change the world.

Amen.

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