

ONE

JOHN 17:1-11; 20-23
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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JUNE 1, 2014/7TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Who is this Jesus?

This is our last Sunday on this topic before heading into the June/summer season.

In these few brief Sundays, we have looked at this question through the lens of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" in John's gospel. We have looked at Jesus as the shepherd and the gate, and the way, truth, and life.

But today's sermon will actually be less about *who Jesus is* than about *what Jesus wants*.

Our text today *begins* with Jesus talking about the nature of his relationship with the Father and the nature of the work he was sent to do, it *ends* with him talking about his followers.

Praying for them, actually.

We pay careful attention when Jesus teaches us *how* to pray (The Lord's Prayer). I think it's equally worth paying attention when Jesus *himself* prays.

What does he pray for?

He prays for two things.

Protection. And that his followers would be *one*.

He doesn't pray that his followers would be *right* or that they would be *successful* or *influential*.

He prays that we would be one.

Nine times, in John 17 alone, we find the word "one."

Apparently it matters a great deal to Jesus, that his followers be one.

How have we been doing with this?

On Thursday, I opened up a commentary by Willard Swartley on this passage and began to read a section called “Jesus’ vision of unity for today.”

The first sentence under the heading read thus:

*Church history is very disappointing.*¹

I laughed out loud. It seemed like the height of understatement.

Jesus’ last words before going the way of the cross for the salvation of the world were an impassioned prayer for the oneness and unity of his followers and....

.... His church has spent the next two or so millennia fighting and fragmenting.

Since the Protestant Reformation, of course, we have become particularly good at this.

Depending on which website you consult, who decides what counts as “Christian” and what doesn’t, and who’s doing the math, there could be as many as 41 000 different Christian denominations in the world right now.

Just sit with that number for a minute.

That’s 40 999 more than one, for those keeping score.

Can we come to any other conclusion that we have utterly and completely and *depressingly* failed to be the answer to Jesus’ prayer?

But it goes far beyond the labels and denominations.

We are getting better at working together as denominations, after all. Our church participates in a number of different initiatives with Anglicans and Presbyterians and Roman Catholics and Lutherans and the United Church and Baptists and Evangelicals...

¹ Willard M. Swartley, *John: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013), 410.

We do the Lenten lunches together each year, we have our service in January during the week of prayer for Christian unity, we read Scripture together in each other's churches. Each of these are ways of saying, "we are *one* church. We may worship in different ways, we may have different understandings on certain aspects of theology or biblical interpretation, we may have different histories, etc., but we are *one* in Christ."

Considering that a few hundred years ago, people were killing each other over the differences that these denominations were founded upon, this represents real progress! ☺

This is very good.

We still don't celebrate communion together, which grieves some of us (Myself included), in general, we are very willing to work across boundaries that were once rigid and impermeable and we should celebrate this whenever and wherever we can.

But our lack of unity now seems to bleed across and among denominational lines and has become concentrated on issues and politics and theology.

Let's narrow our gaze further and think just about our own Mennonite denomination.

Are we one? Many would say, no, we are not.

We could pick the issue:

- Views about sexuality (Being a Faithful Church has brought some of these to the surface)
- Understandings of the nature of religious pluralism/scope of salvation
- Attitudes toward human-induced climate change
- Worship styles
- Our understandings of peace and how it is to be attained/what it requires of us.
- Ideas about how to move forward (Future Directions Task Force is wrestling with this now)

I'm sure there are others that I am missing.

It is rare that I can attend a provincial or national Mennonite gathering or open the pages of the *Canadian Mennonite* and *not* hear some expression of anxiety about the future of our denomination based on a lack of theological unity on one or more of these issues.

Mennonites have always run into a bit of a conundrum when it comes to unity. We've obviously never had a centralized authority structure like a "Mennonite pope" or anything like that; this would run completely counter to our convictions about the priesthood of all believers, the imperative for all believers to interpret Scripture in community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, etc.

The problem is, what happens when we don't agree? Who decides?

In the past unity was perhaps easier to attain when Mennonites lived in tight, close-knit communities with strong (sometimes toxic!) structures of authority in churches and families.

But we don't live in this kind of a world any more.

We live in a culture that is increasingly characterized by individualism and consumerism, and we increasingly think of ourselves in these terms.

We "shop" for churches that meet our needs, our preferences, that suit our theological tastes, that reflect our political views or our perspectives on controversial social issues.

The sovereign self is the centre around which everything else orbits.

So, given the realities of twenty first century Western culture...

Given the realities of a church that is, in many ways and in many places in the postmodern west, in at least *numerical* decline (which isn't the only or even *best* way to measure things, incidentally)...

Given that people increasingly view religion and church as kind of privatized options for those who are "into" spiritual things...

Given the fact that we always interpret everything, including the Bible, through the lens of our own histories and preferences, our own hopes and fears, our own preferences...

Given all these things and more... **how will we ever attain anything like the oneness that Jesus prayed for?**

I submit that we have problematic understandings of the nature of unity and wherein it consists.

First, unity is *not* synonymous with uniformity.

Merriam Webster definition of unity:

- A condition of harmony: accord
- Continuity without deviation or change (as in purpose or action)
- A totality of related parts: an entity that is a complex or systematic whole

Uniformity, by contrast is defined as follows:

The quality or state of being the same: the quality or state of being uniform or identical

So, “unity” can refer to a cohesive totality of related parts, while “uniformity” has to do with sameness.

Often, when we lament that the church isn’t *one* or that it isn’t *unified*, we are in fact expressing our frustration that not every denomination or not everyone in our local denomination or not everyone in our church is *the same*.

Which is to say, we are frustrated that not everyone thinks or acts like *us*.

American sociologist Christena Cleveland has recently written a book called *Disunity in Christ* where she explores the nature of our disunity, why the church has been so prone to splitting and labeling and judging one another.

Her conclusions are not very flattering and not very remarkable, but they make a lot of sense. After pointing to countless experiments and sociological data, she comes to the not very shocking conclusions that, as human beings:

1. We tend to like being right.
2. We tend to like associating (mostly) with people who think like we do.

Put these two together and you have a recipe for fragmentation.

Too often we live and think and speak and argue as though it is *our beliefs about Jesus* that will ultimately save us rather than *Jesus himself*.

(Which is strange, when you think about it, because we would all acknowledge that our knowledge and understanding is always and *necessarily* affected by sin and self-interest and human limitation. *None of us has ever had or will ever have perfect theology!*)

Being “right” and “the same” becomes very important when we fall into this trap.

But Cleveland also says that we shouldn’t *expect* uniformity. We shouldn’t *expect* the body of Christ to be a collection of same-thinking, same-acting, same-looking automatons. This would, in fact, be spectacularly boring.

The church has always been characterized by a difference of opinions. We see this even in the NT, with Peter and Paul having disagreements—sharp ones, even—about the nature of their mission (Galatians 2:11-14), with the gradual way in which Jewish Christians came to accept the Gentiles, with the slow process by which some people relinquished elements of the Jewish law as necessary for salvation.

We have seen this throughout church history.

Oneness does not require uniformity. Indeed, I don’t think this is healthy or even possible in a world where all of us only see in part, not in full.

This doesn’t mean that we don’t have discussions and try to come to common ground; it doesn’t mean that we don’t be honest about our convictions about controversial issues or that we refrain from trying to persuade others of our views.

But it *does* mean that we do so with charity, assuming the best, rather than the worst in one another.

So, if we grant that the church has always been and will always be characterized by a diversity of opinions, where does our unity lie? What is it that makes us one?

The answer is quite simple.

Jesus, and our participation in the love he shares with the Father. This is the only answer. Jesus himself says this.

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.

If we back up just two chapters, in the same “Farewell Discourse,” we read these words:

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The question then becomes, “OK, so what does it mean to love one another? What does that look like?”

I regularly lament the fact that 1 Corinthians is viewed by many as a wedding text about romantic love, because it isn’t. It’s a manifesto for life together as the church.

Here’s what verses 4-8 say:

⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸ Love never ends.

So, to close my sermon today, I want us to do an experiment together.

I want you to think of the person or the group or the theological position or the Christian whose views on controversial issues you find *most* distasteful or difficult to understand or frustrating, even the Christian whose views you might find *offensive* or incomprehensibly stupid.

Do you have a picture in your head?

Now, I want you to think...

As a sister and brother in Christ, my posture towards this person or this group must always be characterized by...

Patience... Kindness... Hope... Endurance...

When I am speaking about or interacting with these sister or brother in Christ (with whom I disagree with, sometimes profoundly!), I must never ...

Be arrogant... Rude... Envious... Boastful... Resentful.

I must not insist on my own way.

I must not rejoice in wrongdoing but in the truth. I must bear all things (even errors!).

And this posture of love toward them must not change. Love never ends.

No matter how much I might disagree with them, I am to love them in this way, for the simple reason that we are sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ, because each of us, in our own ways, with our own errors and blind spots, our sins and struggles, our own triumphs and victories, our own hopes and fears... is clinging to Jesus Christ.

If we *don't* love like this, Paul says, we are like a noisy useless gong. It doesn't matter how right we are, how wise we are, how whatever we are, if we fail to love like this.

But. When we do love one another like this, Jesus promises that the world will know that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that we should not perish, but have eternal life.

So may God help us to be one.

Amen.

